

Preface

Above the world-weary horizons

New obstacles for exchange arise

Or unfold, O ye postmasters!

The Poetics List was founded in late 1993 with this epigraph serving as its first message. I had been on email for only about a year at that time, but from the first was fascinated by the possibilities for group exchange made available by the listserve format. I remember endless conversations with friends explaining the mechanism: you send out one message to the list address and everyone subscribed gets the message almost instantaneously. And to reply, you simply hit "R" on the keypad and write your new message. My friends listened in something as close to astonishment as poets doing hard-time ever can. It was as if I were explaining the marvels of xerography to letterpress printers.

In 1993, most of the poets I knew who had email had those accounts provided by universities and the history of the Poetics List is marked by the change, within a few years, from the dominance of ".edu" (university) email addresses to ".com" (commercial) addresses. At that time, writing email was far more cumbersome than it is today. For the first several years of the Poetics List, most of the messages were written on-line using early versions of Pine or more primitive mail programs, with very limited editing tools available. Typing could be slow and the possibility of revision was limited - especially for those who chose to engage in the spirit of improvised list exchange by spontaneously typing their messages and immediately sending them out. Indeed, it is worth noting that a number of people on the list, working with email systems that had no text buffers, could not retype the lines prior to the one they were typing - making a post to Poetics more like a telegram than a letter. And indeed it was the telegraphic immediacy of this new writing genre that was so electrifying. Group exchange of texts had never been faster or easier.

Initially, I was amazed at how close the Poetics List mimed "live" exchanges in bars, cafes, readings, and apartments that so characterize the social

environment of poetry. It was all here: the quick dismissals and the brilliant précis, the idle chat and the meticulous scholarship, the silly and the self-important, the smug arrogance and startling generosity, the noise and music. I never imagined that there could be a textual equivalent of the temporary and "in the air" exchange among poets that literally surround, and provides crucial contexts for, individual poems. Thanks to the Internet, the intensities of day-to-day poetry conversation, previously restricted to a few urban centers, were now available to a far more geographically diffuse group; indeed, poets living in those urban centers have been the least likely to participate in the Poetics List, possibly because of the many "live" alternatives available to them.

The Poetics List is not, of course, just a U.S. or North American phenomenon, but it should be acknowledged that, in terms of content and participation, the Poetics List is U.S.-centered. Nonetheless, the international access to the list is one of its fundamental dynamics and it offers something uniquely useful to those living particularly far from its geographic center, since for such participants, the information and discussion that the list provides would be virtually impossible to find elsewhere. At the same time, the list has allowed a greater amount of exchange among English-writing poets in the U.K., Australia, Canada, Ireland, and the U.S. than previously had been common.

One of the central features of the Poetics List is the exchange of small and independent press information as well as announcements of poetry readings. Distribution remains one of the most difficult aspects of poetry book and magazine publishing; the list has provided an ideal site for publicizing, selling, and indeed giving away such publications. Over time, as more and more poetry emerged on the web, the list also became a prime site for announcements about web publications. Although such announcements are not included in this collection, the fact that the discussions presented here were accompanied by such information is a crucial frame.

Listserves like Poetics have inaugurated a new genre of writing that is a cross between letters and essays. Most of the pieces of this book were quickly typed prose improvisations that should not be mistaken for carefully revised articles. The unedited quality of the originals has been retained for this collection: enjoy the writing for what it is, keeping in mind the informal setting of the list environment.

The Poetics List, while committed to openness, has always been a private list with an articulated editorial focus and a restricted format. Initially, the Poetics List had about 150 subscribers and it has continued to grow to its present level

of 750 subscribers. Because of the vastness of the Internet, I tried to make the list available primarily to those for whom it would be of greatest interest, realizing that the broader and more diffuse its participants, and the more voluminous its posts, the less valuable it would be a core group of poets and critics and readers who might be reluctant to stick with highly generalized or elementary discussion - whether on how to write poems or how to get published. The trick is to keep those who been around the block one time too many while entertaining the urgent concerns of those who just found out the block exists, perhaps because it's not on the standard issue maps.

During the first five years of the list, individual posts of participants were sent directly to all subscribers and no one approved any specific post. Nonetheless, the editorial function of the list was promoted, or perhaps better to say cajoled, in other ways, including our editorial statement sent to all new subscribers and posted each month on the list. As I put it in the welcome message: "The definition of this editorial project, while provisional, and while open to continual redefinition by list participants, is nonetheless aversive to a generalized discussion of poetry. Rather, the aim is to support, inform, and extend those directions in poetry that are committed to innovations, renovations, and investigations of form and/or/as content, to the questioning of received forms and styles, and to the creation of the otherwise unimagined, untried, unexpected, improbable, and impossible."

Starting in the beginning of 1999, Christopher Alexander became the list moderator and editor; under a new format, subscribers were no longer able to post messages directly to the list. Unfortunately, as the list became bigger and more prominent, it became impossible to continue with unrestricted posting. Simply put, we were too easily open to abuse of the list by those unwilling to work within our stated editorial guidelines. I had made the mistake of holding onto the unrestricted format longer than it was manageable, at the cost of putting in jeopardy what the list, at its best, could achieve. The issue is significant in terms of the Internet as a whole, where endless chatter often produces little in the way of political or aesthetic exchange but, on the contrary, can be understood as a way of defusing or swamping any such possibility. The Poetics List has tried to find a way to enable greater participation in the discussion of the range of poetics to which it is committed. And indeed, since we initiated the moderated format, the size of the list has grown and participation among its subscribers has been more balanced. In one sense, it is not as open as a newsgroup or a chat list because some constraints are put in place. Without these constraints, however, I believe that the range and depth of

contributions would be diminished. In the age of the Internet, more editing not less is required.

The Poetics List is one part of a much larger Internet project-for-poetry, the Electronic Poetry Center (epc.buffalo.edu), founded and directed by Loss Pequeño Glazier. Full archives of the list, plus of course much more, are available at the EPC. From 1997 to 1998, Joel Kuszai managed the list's day-to-day operations, while at the same time working on this selection. Anyone who knows the list from its daily manifestations will have a shock reading the substantial and sustained collection of poetics Joel has culled from the far more chaotic "list itself". At this point in time, experiences with lists are common enough not to require a print equivalent of list dynamics; in any case, no print version could adequately reproduce the look and feel of the Poetics list or other long-time active lists. Instead, Joel has picked a set of works important not just for where they were said but for what they are saying. And, tellingly, he has picked a set of texts that are useful to him as a practicing poet and scholar: this is not the "best of" the Poetics List but something even more interesting, a reading of the Poetics List. Other readers would no doubt have followed quite different paths through the wealth of material available. In shaping this selection, from the early years of the list, Joel Kuszai provides a window onto an ongoing, highly articulate, intensely percolating poetics-in-the making that is a fundamental feature of the most engaging and active poetry of our time. If anyone wonders what today's poets are thinking, what they are concerned about, what they value, this is a good place to start finding out.

– Charles Bernstein

New York, June, 1999

Introduction

In a world where everything is about speed and convenience, where the casual stroll along the boulevard has been replaced by "surfing" at light speed to all reaches of the globe, it is perhaps more important than ever to stop and reflect, consider where we have been. This is especially true for the Poetics List, which, after more than five years and what I estimate to be 50,000 pages of written material, has entered a second phase—one as much determined by the successes and failures of the first as by the ideological intentions of the management. As such, this book represents both the beginning of something and the end of something else.

This is the first book—certainly it will not be the last—edited from the discussions in the Poetics List archive, stored at the Electronic Poetry Center (EPC). And that it is a demonstration of the beginnings, the so-called "early days" of the Poetics List, is quite obvious: the material for this book was mostly gathered from the first two years (and 10,000 printed pages) of the Poetics List. In a larger sense, however, the book represents what was for many the beginning of a new era—one barely imaginable from the words "information age" or "digital revolution"—though the information explosion had been underway for decades. Like all emergent technologies, the usefulness-to-poetry of electronic mail was not apparent until a few poets and writers gained access. At universities where e-mail was available on public terminals before modems were as common as toasters, this was truly a time of beginnings, of genuine hope and excitement. Many of the contributors to this book were graduate students in the early 90s and the technology—clunky and primitive by today's standards—was new to all of us. Little did we know how the internet would change all of our lives, and forever change what it meant to be a writer in a community, in a community of writers, or in a community at all. Certainly it would change how one might participate in the community of contemporary poetry from distances as remote from New York as New Zealand, Thailand and St. Petersburg.

If these changes now seem to us an indispensable part of daily life, remember that it wasn't always the case. Early in my days on-line, and nearly a year before the creation of the Poetics List, I remember Charles Bernstein, reacting to my enthusiasm about the possibilities of electronic mail, suggesting that he didn't want his computer connected to so many other computers, implying that there was something—despite all the hype about virtuality—all too bodily about

it. Despite his amusing dismissal of what would later become an important element of his teaching and practice, in a sense he was right. Greatly misunderstood is the fact that for all the ubiquitous deployment of energy-dependent, "non-physical" (virtual?) mental furniture, the internet is really an extension of corporeality, much like media we've grown accustomed to in the last century. Soon it will be hard to remember what it was like before e-mail—even further, we are the last generation for whom that is even possible. And discussion groups are another matter entirely. It was at the prospective meeting of younger writers, the now-infamous conference, "Writing from the New Coast," held at the State University of New York at Buffalo in the Spring of 1993, where I first heard of the world of electronic discussion groups, even though electronic communities such as The Well had existed for years. Joe Amato, one of the heralds of this strange new world, was passing out flyers announcing his "Nous Refuse" electronic community. There was something ministerial about his advocacy. What kind of community would this be? Would it be an extension of the conference, or more like a party-line, what would come to be known as a "chatroom"?

For many of us the Poetics List was our first encounter with e-mail and we were quick to put it to good use as a form of social architecture. The Poetics List provided the means to continue gatherings and conferences, such as the New Coast, a way to extend the opportunity to be involved to those who could not travel to the urban centers or difficult to reach places where such events usually take place. It provided the opportunity to speed up exchanges that would otherwise take months through the mail, to meet and correspond with individuals and large groups, and to listen in on or contribute to public debates usually reserved for those on conference panels. I saw it as a sort of anarchic meeting hall, a way to facilitate a kind of continuously running newsletter, a communitarian study of the contemporary. If it was decentered it was also a dispersed centeredness. Even the metaphorical name for the early discussion groups—bulletin boards—demonstrated how we perceived the place of that technology: at the center of a public space accessed individually. And if a member of congress can stand up and address an empty chamber on a Friday night, simply for the benefit of the cameras, certainly we can see the logic behind a midnight meeting of poets, talking their trade. Like the democracy of the witness in a meeting house, the bulletin board metaphor is only a cipher for that early optimism about this medium, which I shared. The optimistic manner of the public debate in some of the earliest exchanges on the Poetics List, even early interventions and dogfights typical of discussion groups, reflected the general euphoria about the redefinition of community that was underway. Hopefully Poetics@ carries some of the spirit of that time.

But the "good old days" have passed and perhaps the end of that childlike optimism is also reflected here. The public sphere of contemporary letters is both expanded and smothered by a space like the Poetics List. For all the optimism of the town hall meeting, the discussion list format can become more like a public soap-opera, with constant need to redress institutional (or otherwise "public") boundaries. This sometimes sinister theater of immanence, the spontaneous forum for publication, is part of what makes the Poetics List so great in conception but often so troublesome and problematic in daily life. The heightened tendency towards immediate exchange and the ease of the "reply" function enable both mindless chit-chat and a pandering to argument itself. While many have advocated that style of discussion list, and certainly there are plenty of them out there in cyberspace, the sometimes low quality of the conversation has been a limiting feature of the list, something which has made "editorial agency a necessary intervention," as one person put it recently.

A collection of writings about topics which I found to be relevant or representative of something that needed to be heard again, this book does not attempt to represent the list as a whole. It would be impossible to represent the play-by-play action on the list in any definitive sense and anyone seeking to view the historical list in its natural habitat should consult the EPC, where the complete record of the list's activity is available to the public. At the same time, this book is not a "Best of the Poetics List" nor is it going to be the definitive book based on material from the Poetics List. There will be others with more specific topics, larger more inclusive books, on-line editions with much greater volume than the space limitations of this format will allow. One might imagine a book devoted to particular issues, or presenting the writings and exchanges of specific individuals. The massive scope of the source material in the Poetics List archives required that I make decisions from the outset about what kinds of material to exclude. I have not included any of the kinds of publication notices, readings, and other announcements of calendar events, though this feature of the list has been perhaps its greatest attraction. For what I hope will be obvious reasons, I have also removed, as much as possible, the daily drama of life on the Poetics List. My conception of this editorial project also necessitated that I remove the posts from their original occasions, including dates and e-mail addresses, though I can imagine many reasons for including them in a similar book. It would be ridiculous to try to catalog all of the things that I wanted to include but couldn't. After making an initial cut to a workable thousand pages, my job suddenly became very difficult.

Working from one of the most complicated and various source texts, my goal as an editor has been to create a conversation, or series of conversations, out of

other conversations—to illuminate the dialogical possibility of this new form of textual space known as the electronic discussion group. The emphasis in editing this book has been primarily the topics addressed in the various messages, not in the forum itself, even while self-consciousness of both the possibilities and limitations of this new medium is a recurrent theme on the list. On the other hand, this book is very much about the space where these writings and discussions occurred. It is as much intervention and critique as presentation and contextualization. As well, this book is intended as a contribution to the criticism found elsewhere in the world of contemporary poetics. It marks the introduction of a conversation about poetics into the electronic format and the return of that accumulated public criticism, what is called in one of the contributions to this volume, "a reading that is watched over," to the world from which it came.

Finally, some caveats and acknowledgments. The book has been broken into sections to give clarity and organization to that which exists in an unnavigable maelstrom in archival form. And given the initially electronic nature of the writing in this book, some difficulties inevitably arise when converting to the print medium. For instance, I chose to standardize certain typographical elements, such as would indicate book titles or emphasis. In most cases, however, the typography and eccentricities allowed by e-mail formatting are maintained. Also, the limited structure of the book format does not permit the inclusion of every post or person who may be referred to in these pages, and presumably that feeling of having missed something important is one quality of the Poetics List that is going to be maintained here.

I urge anyone with questions about the content of this book to consult the Electronic Poetry Center for the full Poetics List archive. I want to thank Charles Bernstein and James Sherry for the opportunity to edit this book, and thank them especially for their patience, generosity, and feedback concerning the manuscript. I also want to thank my parents, who have given me much more than my first community.

– Joel Kuszai

San Diego

Coeval with . . . to Ghosts vs. Martians

From: Joe Amato

Subject: coeval with...

i must admit to being taken by a sense of place, and corresponding dislocations... for me, whatever creative possibilities emerge from disruptions in place move me to thresholds---cognitive, emotional---that are often painful... in part because place for me IS the timing of space, a spacing in time replete with boundaries...

when i look out my window (in the spare bdrm. of my apt. where i've located my mac) i see an urban landscape that bears little resemblance to the suburban, woodsy, fifties territories of my childhood... nostalgia here is not the point--the point is that i feel a spiritual resonance with the geographies of central and upstate new york, while at the same time i have no intention of residing again in the city of my birth (syracuse, the salt city)... ambivalence more polyvalence--it's a mixture of feelings, longings, desperations, impulses--in the blood, as it were...

hence looking into this window is yet looking out another, and vice-versa... "coeval with" your various readings of this post--but with a few things more, perhaps...

the issue has to do with regionalisms as well as (inter)nationalisms... i'm hearing, in the background (someplace) lennon's "imagine," a song from my late teens, and i'm wondering what sort of cosmopolitan it is who doesn't identify with such identities--which is NOT to say the lyrics... which, yes, translate into overarching sociopolitical exigencies...

fifty miles south of me the land flattens out like a drainboard... i spent a couple of lonely years in those directions, dealing with the death of my folks... but my solitudes were marked, thankfully, by having made a few best friends...

down that way, far as the (untrained) i can see [sorry] one generally witnesses endless orthogonal acres of single-crop farming--corn, or soybeans... this, for example and for me, is most definitely NOT nature...this latter may be

problematic everywhere today, but whatever else it is, i don't quite identify it with non-diversity...

i have an eye for hill and dale and that sorta thing... variations against the Same, and in pixeled terms as well... but i'll probably mself end up someplace in the suburbs, or fringe burbs... i'm hoping it won't be entirely too mediocre, mall-ish... but there's this thing about having the bucks, yknow, to move, and where—and i'd like a little tomato patch before i'm too much older...

i'm used to small pockets of italian ethnicity (being 'second generation' on my dad's (sicilian) side) and little euro-pockets as well (being 'first generation' on my mom's side)... chi-town does this for me at times, but the midwest, otherwise, rarely does... hence i'm east in many ways... my neuroses operating on the surfaces, the silent machismo of the midwest grates on me at times... and such regional, even moody judgments follow from feelings born of having found correspondences between my convictions, as i live them out, and my ongoing, provisional understanding—nothing arbitrary here, or innocent, or necessarily nice...

and yet i carry around a southwestern landscape someplace in my jeans [sorry again], a true-blue Western mythology probably as much a consequence of loving, in my child-adulthood, westerns (cinema and tv) as a function of more legislated attempts to establish an american ethos...

if there is yet an argument to be made in such terms... saturated though it might be with hollywood and jiffypop, my memory, altering, is something i live with and through...

if 'i don't know where i stand,' exactly, i'm damn well gonna have to be standing someplace, metaphysically speaking... looking out toward the shifting horizon, trying to figure the when's and where's of things as i find them...

From: Kevin Killian

Subject: Carla Harryman's Memory Play

... I'll jump in & give my 2 cents worth on Memory Play [O Books, 1994]. I am an American actor who was trapped inside the darn thing for ten months in a workshop production here in San Francisco, and I'll tell you, it took me eight and a half months before I figured out what it was "about." Harryman, the author, and Philip Horvitz, our director, were always mum whenever any of us actors asked, two Cheshire cats sitting there creamily on the sidelines, always replying only, "You decide." So finally I did. Hope you're familiar with the film "Mildred Pierce," because "Memory Play" is "Mildred Pierce" with a happy or at any rate conciliatory ending.

However I may be wrong about this. Years ago I wrote a review of Harryman's book Vice and stated forthrightly my belief that Vice must have been influenced by CH's constant viewing of the US cop show "Miami Vice." Two minutes later the phone was ringing and she denied it, saying she had never watched MV in her life! Consequently I know a little bit about "Memory Play" but don't go by me.

I played the "Miltonic Humiliator" and had a wonderful costume, designed by John Woodall, a kind of Worth gown and a huge Merlin type hat. I had to sing and dance in several production numbers, and taunt all the other characters; finally, defeated by my own love for the Pelican, I succumbed to a kind of Madama Butterfly swoon and killed myself-off stage. It was great, and Cris, you can see it on video if you have the VHS format over there. All the other actors were good, and I was a bit abashed because CH and PH, realizing that the Miltonic Humiliator doesn't really have very many lines in the published script, and perhaps not wanting to waste my talents, allowed me, no, ordered me, to make up my own lines.

I remember initially during our first workshop version of "Memory Play," that Kathy Acker was playing the part of the "Pelican," —I suppose CH couldn't secure Kathy for the ten months it took us to rehearse and present the play. But think of her saying those lines, her great, scabrous energy melting the proscenium.

Thanks for letting me put in my two cents on "Memory Play."

From: Peter Quartermain

Subject: Robin Blaser: "No Fixed Address"

Robin Blaser's new book *The Holy Forest*, published 30 November by Coach House in Toronto, was officially launched with a reading by Blaser at the Western Front in Vancouver, 3 December 1993. What follows is the text of my introductory remarks.... For about two hours Blaser read to well over 200 people: a new work "Fax 1 (to Sharon Thesen)", followed by the whole of *Cups*, "Image-Nation 9 (half and half)", "yellow ribbons", "As If By Chance", "Interlunar Thoughts", "Even on Sunday", "in the tree tops", "Image-Nation 24 (Oh, Pshaw)", "Image-Nation 24 (Exody)" and some others.

When Stan Persky and Coach House Press asked me to introduce Robin tonight I started marking up passages in *The Holy Forest* that I thought I might quote, only to discover that I was marking everything. These poems utterly resist predatory reading. I'm not going to take up much of your time, and to make sure of that, I'm going to read to you. For there is so much, and so little, to say. "a candy-wrapper with a phone number / on it suffices to call the largeness, and / the smallness." Of all the poets I can think of, none so quickly — in the space of two lines, three perhaps — draws the reader so into his language, into the world of the poem, into the imagination. The poems retrieve what we did not know we'd lost, but whose lack we mourn. They retrieve the reader's imagination, retrieve imagination, reminding us of what it is, then, to read. Composing the good, the imagination invents its own landscape by seeing where it is.

The fact that we have lost our way in the holy forest does not mean we can shit in the soup. Or cut down the trees. Or lose our alertness. It is a place of terrors and wonders. It is the only forest we've got. And it's unknowable. "transcendence," the poet tells us, "like ourselves is historical, even in dreams" (324). That's why the truth is laughter.

Of course there's another way to say this: in Allen Ginsberg's words, we're not souls, communicating, we're just meat talking to meat. And that's all we've got: "a lacunary system, a cosmos unsure of its postulates" (368). The absurd comedy of that condition is also an absurd nightmare, of course. But spirit begins in matter—as does our language and all histories.

There's another way of saying this, too. Blaser says it with great wit:

If there's one thing Harry learned
to love more than the sacred, it was
the sacred in ruins.

This is the only world we've got. There has always been a garden and it has always been among the ruins, a path, and a relief. If paradise is to be found anywhere, it can only be found here. The difficulty with Heaven and Hell is that it's hard to tell the difference. Each, after all, is a source of light, and neither is a source of ease – the sense of paradise includes its loss.

But turn your back on the sacred, shit in the soup, and all hell breaks loose. Turn your back on the sacred and you force it into the violence of leashed imagination, which will burst its bonds and us in the process; turn our backs on the sacred, make the artist (as one poem quotes) the deodorant puck in the urinal of life (191), and WE erupt into violence, or we become dull grey, the poet tamed, our dreams our musics and our architectures our joys our sorrows our passions come home at last members of no more than a classroom education.

Blaser is the poet who makes a stink. He reminds us that we are creatures of language and it is our very nature to be in need. He is the poet of disturbance; our doom is that there is always more, and the only surety we have is the violence of our desire. What holds these poems, what holds the attention, is the strength of their passion and their love, their attention to what is. The mind / the poet / the imagination exfoliates, in-forming and out-forming, the dis-covery re-covery of what is and what-it-is-to-be alive. Mind as body, thought's flesh. Making sense / making Sense / extending the perceived/able. the unseen is not beyond our vision. Blaser is a visionary poet, but not by that with his eyes on any world but this one. A great player of syntax, sound, and line break, Blaser always resists completion, every line always turns to another – or to potentiality, potency – never resting, but without display.

The event we are celebrating tonight, the publication of *The Holy Forest*, is major. I can't think of another book of Canadian poetry which has been so anxiously and eagerly awaited, and which is so well worth the wait. It is an astonishing and wonderful book, the integrity of the writing, the refusal to pander to taste or to fashion, to kowtow to the demands of others, unmatched save perhaps by Basil Bunting and Louis Zukofsky. Please welcome (and honour) Robin Blaser.

From: Dodie Bellamy

Subject: poetry and visual art

I've been following the poetry and visual art discussion with much interest, since these past few years I've felt much more in tune with the visual art world than the poetry—or prose—worlds I come in contact with.

I was amused this morning when I read the following passage by Spring Ulmer:

> one of the reasons why I have come to love and respect poetry and the
'poetry > world' is because it lacks the elitism that floods the art world.

I feel like a shriveled up old skeptic beside Spring's hopeful vision, but I don't see how anybody could not call the contemporary poetry world, particularly the world represented by the members of this list, elitist. I don't say that as a criticism. In fact, the elitism of avant-garde poetry, in a way, works in its favor, not financially certainly, but in terms of its growth as art. Outsiders' fear of it keeps it pure. Since I write "experimental" prose, I envy this privileged position of poetry, in terms of the common person. Not being intimidated by prose, every dope in the world seems to think they have a right to comment on prose, making the most inane declarations, tossing off grating terms such as "plot development" and "character development" with abandoned zeal. A non-writer would have to be oafish on the level of Animal House, however, to say something equally idiotic to an avant-garde poet like, "Why doesn't it rhyme?"

All of the visual artists I know are doing cutting-edge work, and most of them are on the level in their careers where it's not an incredibly big deal for them to get written about in Art Forum, for instance. Hanging out with them is lots of fun because you get to go to fabulous parties and dinners at nice restaurants, paid for by their galleries. In the poetry world, in California at least, if you're lucky, you get to juggle for a glass of \$3.99-a-bottle Chilean merlot and a wedge of brie—and there's no point, ever, really, in dressing up.

Many of the artists I know are doing work that's involved with in-your-face sexuality, which is treated by (everyone but the NEA, of course) as interesting, but no big deal. That's what I'm really jealous about, artists' ability to do sexually explicit work and not somehow feel tainted or whispered about.

The conservatism in this country concerning literature is something that drives me up the wall. If there is a financial reason for the disparity between the more general acceptance of a visual avant-garde, I think it's because a piece of art is bought by one person in one large wad, while writing, for it to make any money, has to be bought by tons of people. Because of mass reproduction, the very physical form of writing is populist.

There's also something to do with most people not recognizing the materiality of words. With art, the viewer is always aware that it's made out of Something. But, with writing, I think that, other than the most sophisticated, people do not see that it's made out of words. It's about Feelings, Truth, Experience. I'm currently reading Viktor Shklovsky's Theory of Prose, which was written in 1925, and it seems to me, sadly enough, that the contents therein would still be news to most people, including most writers. I recently was a co-judge for the literary applicants to an artists' colony, and I was amazed how out of the 70 or so applications, hardly any of them, including the poets, showed any awareness that, bottom line, their material was language. The only "experimental" writer who submitted was Avery Burns, who I chose as one of my three choices. When the larger panel (who laughed at conservative visual art, and chose wild, interesting stuff), voted to reduce my choices from three to two, the panel's decision was reached quicker than OJ's jury, like instantly: no Avery. When I suggested that Avery's work would mesh well with the avant-garde composers and visual artists, the response was that they couldn't "relate" to his poetry. Like they could "relate" to music made from clanking steel objects.

Remember: wallowing in obscurity is good for the soul.

From: Wystan Curnow

Subject: Re: poetry and visual art

Dodie,

I was amused, too. Bemused. Actually I know plenty of NY artists who are 'amazingly open, personal, and unpretentious' but I also like my artists reserved, cool, and up with the play, here in Auckland but, you know, especially in New York. The city, seems to me, is more than it's moneyed dealer/museum structure—calling it corrupt is a symptom of poet's self-pity more than a cure for it—and US campuses are almost by definition islands of teaching/learning devoid of culture, in the sense of the culture sustained by major urban centres. University professors can be open, personal and unpretentious, but do they dress well? What are their tastes in art, music and poetry? So, one of the great advantages enjoyed by visual artists has been the cultural life of New York. I don't know that the workshop culture on campuses is a key, because in New Zealand the difference between the mainstreams of the two arts is much the same and there are hardly any courses in creative writing here.

Jordan Davis said the view that any painting with words in it instantly fell to half the value it would have had had it not those words still had substance. For much of the 80s it was arguably the other way around. And certainly, the likes of Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, make a decent living installing words on gallery walls and even selling them to collectors and museums for good prices.

There seems little doubt that the prestige of literature (and of poetry especially) has fallen over the century, and that of the visual arts has risen. The process has accelerated over the second half. This has something to do with the rise of visual media generally. There is probably a connection, then, between the greater prestige of the visual arts and the more avant-garde character of its mainstream.

I was interested in George Bowering's comment that in Canada the poetics of avant-garde were the mainstream. Even if he is exaggerating, and given that it's not the case in New Zealand, I nevertheless suspect that internationally it is the US avant-garde tradition that is the more widely known and followed. Am I wrong? How this has a bearing on the art/poetry relation is that in the visual

arts the mainstream is—and over the last 15 years as New York's dominance has declined—an international construction.

From: Alan Loney

Subject: The Panic of Jane Stafford

Re: "The panic of O", Jane Stafford, New Zealand Books, Vol 4 No 3, September 1994. [Originally published as a letter to the editors of New Zealand Books.]

For the past 25 to 30 years some of "us", i.e. writers who have generally been considered to be working somewhere on the margins of New Zealand literature, have been on the receiving end of a number of, shall I say, negative adjectives attached to our work and the work of others that we respect, by "mainstream" authors and critics in book reviews. It is an impressive list, and maybe it would be best to start by exhibiting it, in all its glory, just so that we know clearly what is being discussed. Here are some of the more frequently applied: solipsistic, elitist, pretentious, obscure, empty, cognoscenti, private reference, no discernible thought, resistance to interpretation, provocative, smart-arse, clever, wilful, self-indulgent, contempt for the reader, ivory tower, writing for a coterie, intellectual, pseudo-intellectual, so-called postmodern, so-called "Language Poets", excluding the average reader, void of meaning, inaccessible, etc etc etc. Jane Stafford's review of Murray Edmond's *The Switch* and Michele Leggott's *Dia*, both recently published by Auckland University Press, contains the first fifteen of these. They are now, after all these years, nothing more nor less than a set of clichéd insults, and their purpose is invariably to provide excuses for refusing to actually engage with the work being so characterised.

Jane Stafford's review of the Edmond and Leggott texts is argued, detailed, and attempts to get beyond the mere name-calling exercise that I have nevertheless stated that it includes. It is therefore to be welcomed as providing a genuine opportunity for reply in ways that the mere name-calling procedure does not. But these negative terms are so repeated and familiar in New Zealand poetry reviewing that it seems less a matter of *deja vu*, than of a kind of ventriloquism - where the dummy keeps on producing its lines long after the operator has vacated the premises.

Credentials and allegiances

Ms Stafford is at pains to establish a kind of credibility for herself, one that is based on credentials - "I teach a second year university course etc.". Ordinarily, such candour is to be welcomed. But one can easily compile other paragraphs, one of which might begin: "Murray Edmond is a lecturer in Drama at the

University of Auckland, is convenor of the post-graduate Diploma in Drama programme, and lectures in a stage 3 American poetry course. He is the author of 6 books of poetry (several of them out of print) and so on". Another such paragraph might start with : "Michele Leggott is a lecturer at the University of Auckland in New Zealand poetry, in American poetry, in Australasian Women's Literature, with a Ph.D. from University of British Columbia at Vancouver. She has published 3 books of poetry (the first is out of print), and her major study Reading Zukofsky's 80 Flowers was published by Johns Hopkins University Press on the recommendation of Hugh Kenner etc etc". It's not my purpose to pit credentials against each other here (that would at the least be silly), but to make the more important point that we all have credentials of one sort or another. In a field like "literature" such credentials do not automatically confer guarantees of appropriate information, approach, or judgement. We are all contestable when discussions about values are taking place.

Whatever else one thinks of the work of Michele Leggott, Murray Edmond, and, let's be clear, Alan Loney and any others with whom we are perceived to have some sort of allegiance, what one cannot say is that they all write in the same way or that the works of each are easily able to be confused with each other's – by any attentive reading. And yet the 'critical' reception of them by most 'mainstream' authors and reviewers is so familiarly uniform that, instead of getting genuine differential readings of these authors in reviews, we're getting the homogeneous operation of an agenda, a false ideology which specifies these authors as a 'them' which can therefore, according to the normal functioning of 'us and them' patterns, be blithely treated by the same unexamined, unsupported and negative terms and gestures.

What that agenda is I don't much care. What I do care about is the pretence that genuine critical reading is taking place; the pretence that those critics have some sort of 'ownership' of the scope, purpose and condition of poetry in New Zealand; and the presumptive judgment that their reviled authors are not serious about their life's work as poets or writers; that they lack integrity and competence of almost any kind whatever; that they have no respect for the work and works of others who work outside their own writerly project; and that they have no other apparent motive for writing but to demonstrate to a small group of people who are equally despicable that they are cleverer than anybody else. These assumptions, running throughout Ms Stafford's review, and through hundreds of reviews of poetry in this country in the last 25 to 30 years, are as cheap and unwarranted as anything she or anyone else directs at such writers as Murray Edmond and Michele Leggott.

A personal disposition or two

Ms Stafford's review begins in a mode of reasonableness and with a proper pedagogical concern for students of literature who are having to learn to engage with unfamiliar texts. It reads like the kind of introduction that might prepare one for the reviewer's own engagement with the work of the authors under discussion. Alas, it does not. What it leads to, almost inexplicably ('almost' as, one tends to expect this sort of response by now), is this: "Which is why I feel angry...". Anger? Why? What business has a professional academic to be 'angry' about texts to be discussed? Are they advocating the pleasures of child abuse? Are they suggesting people would feel better if they beat the hell out of someone rather than having all that pent up feeling floating around? Do they propose ethnic cleansing in their suburb? Wherefore anger? Ms Stafford establishes credentials, I would have thought, for being able to discuss these works. What she actually says is: "I'm trying to make a connection with it. I can't." So. The reviewer's credentials, i.e. her education, her qualifications, her personal predilections, her teachers, her colleagues, her peers, and her reading, have not at all prepared her for the works under review. One could very well be angry about that. Instead of acknowledging her situation however she has chosen to pour scorn on the poets, as if somehow they are to blame for it.

To take this point a bit further, there are other, telling, phrases that support my concern. Ms Stafford sees "a more sinister possibility"; "no discernible thought here"; "so old-fashioned"; "smart-arse elitism"; "got a nasty feeling"; "I'm damned if I'm going to"; "I have this nasty feeling"; "I find these two collections depressing" and so on. Why, exactly, is all this nastiness and bad feeling supposed to function as a proper basis for, or condition of, the elucidation of contemporary poetry for what Ms Stafford deigns to call "the less enlightened reader"? We are not told. It is assumed that the reviewer has these bad feelings in good faith. Ms Stafford has given no one any reason to buy such a proposition.

The ventriloquist's dummy

Does this sub-title merely trade one harshness for another? Perhaps. But it points to a view of things, an agenda, a false and unquestioning ideology. This ideology asserts itself by using a body of clichés, shibboleths even, in order to obscure the meanings of others, and to deny their actual differences. ... It is, additionally, usual for assistance from others – "A kind and more literate friend" – to be identified in academic writings. And rather than ask how much

less literate is implied by that "more", I would rather know who is doing the talking here? Or, to put it another way, who's the ventriloquist in this instance?

A not uncommon kind of contradiction that appears in negative reviews is exhibited in Ms Stafford's aside (to whom, exactly?) "a little Saussurian reference for the cognoscenti?". It's hard to take seriously the notion that such a statement is directed to "the less enlightened reader". If it is, how do they, outside of, say, an academic environment, understand "Saussurian"? This aside is also, I'm afraid, directed at a "cognoscenti", and a clear distinction is therefore implied, like it or not, between the author's 'cognoscenti' and the poet's 'cognoscenti' - ours and theirs, us and them. But if she is, say, talking to me (and, after all, I too am a 'reader'), then I would say that she is not at all up with the play, either with Saussure (who dealt with spoken, not written language), or with Heidegger who said "It is in language that things first come into being and are" (Introduction to Metaphysics), or with Charles Olson's reliance on the work of Jane Ellen Harrison for his assertion that myth (the stories that cultures, oral and literate, tell themselves about themselves) comes first from the mouth. I introduce these other writers here, not to show off my naturally immense erudition, but to signal that we all have such reading lists behind and operative within what we say. For all of us they are different of course, but we all have these alliances, allegiances and engagements to one degree or another. They are not the same kind of thing as 'credentials'. If our 'reading lists' are too different, and I am suggesting that this is likely to be the case as between Ms Stafford and the poets she reviews, then little wonder that the reviewer finds it hard to connect with the work.

However, it is the outright refusals that I find the most interesting aspect of Ms Stafford's review. First, the refusal to be (indeed the specific injunction not to be) literal – "Don't be literal". If the literal is the first thing to be denied of unfamiliar writing, then it's understandable that a reader might find a grasp of its metaphorical content hard to come by. If, as Ms Stafford maintains, "a metaphor should expand meaning" (tho I don't accept this formulation myself) then it's possible that the literal is one of the places from which metaphor can "expand". It is, in any case, a perfectly reasonable place to begin. That it should be precluded, requires more explanation than a list of other options, especially when, for instance, my own teaching experience suggests that it is wise counsel to keep the options open until they falter – in any given instance.

A further type of refusal is performed in the review when, in discussing Leggott, the reviewer writes that a particular passage "would be fine if I knew what the last two words meant". Those two words are "HYDROPHILE

PURLING". It is not I think too churlish to propose the use of a dictionary in such a circumstance. 'Hydrophile' is derived from 'hydrophilic', a chemical term meaning 'having a strong affinity for water'. 'Purling' has, as one of its meanings (and the others are pertinent to the poem) 'flowing with a curling or rippling motion, as a shallow stream over stones'. According to Ms Stafford, she should now be in a position to regard the poet's line as "fine". But by refusing to even admit meanings that are accessible to her, she has paved the way for yet another insult to be attached to the work, yet another opportunity for the ventriloquist's dummy to steal the show.

Another line of refusal is the refusal to give the poet the benefit of the reviewer's own insight as exhibited in the review itself. It is this extraordinary strategy that clinches my claims about ventriloquism. Two examples will do. In considering Edmond's poems 43 and 44, Ms Stafford interrogates (properly) the text for meaning. Among her initial notes are language play, sexual content, parallels with other texts in the book, the presence in English of a large number of homographs – all good places to start in establishing a field of meanings for the poems. But just when this beginning is noted she cuts off the flow of elucidatory reading by saying "And it gets worse". Worse? How does a series of valid insights (tho preliminary ones, to be sure) add up automatically to a bad thing? In considering Leggott, the reviewer states that Elizabeth Barrett Browning is "an obvious figure" in the poem *Dia*, yet notes that the reference to "the Portuguese/wind" etc. "may be an allusion", and asks us to note her (Stafford's) "tentativeness" in making the suggestion. Well, what I've already noted is the strength of the phrase "an obvious figure".

The most blatant refusal however is the reviewer's refusal to even consider the poem "*Micromelismata*". 'Concrete' poetry is historically a particular moment, largely in Europe, but extending to Britain and the United States also, within a wider context of shaped poetry, going back to the work of George Herbert (died 1633) in England. Herbert himself knew of at least one predecessor for his work, an edition of *The Greek Anthology, Theocriti Idyllia*, printed by P. Brubacchius, Frankfurt, 1545. To insist that it is legitimate to reduce this tradition to a mere fashion of c.1972, to which no critic need return in order to speak of newer writing is, I am sorry to say, no more than an excuse for one's own ignorance, and an attempt to blame the poet for the critic's failure of nerve in the face of the material reality of the text. One is of course under no obligation to like or admire any given text, but one does, in public, have to deal with it in an open engagement.

What I am bothered about in these refusals is that just at that point when a genuine critical reading looks about to be achieved, Ms Stafford throws in the towel. Again, an opportunity to assist the "unenlightened reader" to deal with a strange looking text is waved away in favour of the agenda that requires that these poets must be belittled and insulted rather than read critically. And of course the problem with reading attentively, generously and critically is that there is the severe danger of having to change one's opinion as the result of reaching genuine findings.

The news about elitism

As a lecturer in English at a university, Ms Stafford is a member of a small band of elite, specialist readers of literature. As an academic, she can claim uncommon status as an expert, and as a professional worker in the field of literary criticism. The number of people who get paid a salary in New Zealand for teaching literature at tertiary level is, in relation to the population at large, very small. Now, books of poems in New Zealand are typically published in editions of between 500 and 1000 copies, and are very rarely (except in the case of anthologies used for teaching purposes) ever reprinted. There are some exceptions above and below these figures, but 500 to 1000 copies is the typical range. There are, at least, 1.5 million literate adults in New Zealand. A thousand copies (let's be kind to the argument) as a percentage of 1.5 million, is 0.066% of the literate adult population. Anyone who thinks this constitutes the democratization of poetry in relation to the literate population at large has, in my view, a lot of explaining to do. If that percentage was closer to 66% for so-called "mainstream" poets and 0.066% for the likes of Edmond and Leggott, I'd have to admit there was a point to be made along these lines. But, it isn't, and there isn't. What it means is that poetry is an elitist proposition per se, at any level at which anyone reads any of it. It also means that 'the general reader' or 'the general public' is not the target group for any publisher of poetry in New Zealand. Those of us who are involved with poetry in any way are all splashing about in the elitist pot together.

The subjectivity at the end of the world

The last comment made by Ms Stafford denies that 'subjectivity' is an interesting issue. What I have attempted to show here is that it is primarily the poets' 'subjectivity' that has been on trial throughout her review. The list of insults given in my first paragraph says it as well as anything I can end with. They are nearly all solely applicable to people, rather than to texts. If poetry needs anything at all from critics these days, it is close reading, clear and

attentive critical analysis. One of the characteristics of, as they say, 'our time', is that there are many more and various backgrounds – cultural, geographic, intellectual, and personal and so on – than can be neatly fitted or reduced to some monolithic sense of "mainstream", to which we are all supposed to conform. This does not mean, in my view, that anything goes. What it does mean is that a greater degree of care, of openness, and of courtesy needs to be operating in the field of public letters, if we are not to simply sit back on 'us & them' perches and merely hurl insults at one another under the privilege of having access to print.

From: Dodie Bellamy

Subject: Breaking the Rules

As a prose writer, I always feel fortunate that I never had a single course in prose writing (beyond Freshman comp), particularly how to write a short story. Sometimes in writing I think it is very useful to have something to write against, but it brings shivers of revulsion (Kevin recently reread Powers of Horror for his Blaser talk, so JK is on my mind) to think of me having this spectre of traditional narrative and plot structure and character development (this is much worse than the skin on the top of old milk, uuuurrrghhhhhfffff!) to settle my stomach over. I've got plenty else to think about in structuring my work. I basically learned to write through imitation, and I often had no idea in the beginning why I was doing much of what I was doing in narrative. I saw somebody else doing it and I thought it was neat, so I'd try it. Particularly I copied techniques of a very talented schizophrenic woman in Bob Gluck's writing workshop--transcending linearity was like breathing for her, while I was at home pulling my hair out over it.

Now I could give a theoretical rationalization for everything I do, but the theory came later (and deepened my work, I think)--again, I approached it always from a gut level. I read theory to find more neat things, most of the neat things I found were in art and psychoanalytic film theory rather than in literary theory. I usually feel much more akin to what's going on in the art world than in the writing world, plus it was easier to seize and adapt neat things that were tangential to what I was doing.

I should be honest and say that Bob Gluck was guiding me through this process, but usually in his kitchen rather than in the writing workshop. Scooping salmon patties from a frying pan, he would give me gentle little nudges like, "Dodie, if you take the personal and push it as far as you can, it becomes universal."

In my own writing workshop I've had students who were amazingly well-versed in theory, but who wouldn't have a clue as to how apply that knowledge to their own work. It's like teaching somebody grammar and then expecting them to speak English. It ain't gonna happen that way.

"Learn the rules then break" them sounds like such a militaristic approach to innovation.

From: Patrick Phillips

Subject: Diane Ward's Imaginary Movie

This is a reply to a personal posting. I couldn't contact the person who sent it to me, so I've removed the name.

I suppose this may be regarded as a patient articulation, my take on Imaginary Movie [Potes & Poets 1992]. What filling out of the poem this accomplishes I deny. This isn't my "goal." But my "goal" is to tend to some of the structures of imagination elicited of me by IM. I suppose by posting your note you had no idea I would respond, or attempt to respond, so fully. But, as it so happens, today is devoted to tomorrow's class and you've done me a great service. I hope it doesn't turn out to be a great maze for you.

I too have to admit a dissatisfaction with the "pleasure of the text," that its giving is to say the least opaque, its color often as delightful as the package P&P put together. This grayness can be phonically supported by my take on her reading of the poem at the Ear Inn in NYC; it too being modulated to the point of evaporation, read through with only occasional, slight pauses at line breaks and with little audible support for the mental knots she ties. (However, she is very quiet and calm in personal conversation). This said, I still regard the text with a great pleasure, perhaps more with the "jouissance" that Barthes intended. Another Barthes statement on pleasure: "...pleasure in pieces: language in pieces: culture in pieces. Such texts are perverse in that they are outside any imaginable finality—"even that of pleasure" (bliss does not constrain to pleasure; it can even apparently inflict boredom)."

What I'm getting at here is that the textual evidence of IM may not have to partake in a paradigm of pleasure to emit, or engender a cultural artifact. Granted, the cultural/poetic artifact of suspended modifiers, non-substantiated prepositions, oscillating predicates et al. has long instigated a politics of text which by now is easily seen, or tolerated (that sometimes we critics/poets remain hostage to the tropes and the critical discourse that was intended as liberating). Granted the "freeze-frame" metaphor is only neat when tied to the title and then perhaps only tropic; and that the six line strophes (I say strophe instead of stanza because of the attendant personality in "strophe" which means, among other things "apartment" in Italian, whereas, stanza, among other things, means to "mental posture") only provide marginal support for the metaphor of movie, or for the internal poetic structure of each six line unit. This

characterization of some the structures of the poem would in many critical circles be a pan, a thumbs down in siskel and eberteze. Yet, under my criteria and reading practice another, quite successful text surfaces.

I don't "read" this text so much as allow it to sound out its own cultural relevance. This is not as passive as it may seem. This sounding invites a text which is an "imaginary form" which insists no matter how disgruntled I may become with the way the text sits on the page. Its imaginary form becomes a discussion between my imagination and the culture's and the poem's, a discussion which is often absent from the page entirely. This absence, or in effect ascribed culture, is what keeps me. Often this keeping is similar to the hostage taking as mentioned above, but it remains political in the slippage between those participants in the discussion. It is this slippage which is the field of intervention for me. This is the level of engagement. This is personal, it is ideological, it is social. You mention the social as a field of intervention. So often, even in O'Hara and Reznikoff, I feel the poem is a description of something material, a personalization which elementizes some margin running the gamut from imprisonment (I as the disenfranchized interlocutor of poetic/cultural condition) to oration (I as arbiter of the imaginary condition). This field of intervention I often find less entreating, in some ways less the jouissance, an more an effigy of the entrapped or of entrapment. As to the materialization of the social field of intervention Wittgenstein said "Psychology connects what is experienced with something physical, but we connect what is experienced with what is experienced." I ask what then does poetry connect?

Now is this "blackmail?" (the Barthesian blackmail of theory) I'm not sure. I'm also not sure what you mean by the poem's and the theory's autonomy; I'm not sure there has ever been such a thing as theoretical autonomy, certainly not technological autonomy. And when it comes to technology, not much can be left out. The theoretical apparatus evident here of course is not culturally bankrupt, certainly it isn't grammatically bankrupt even if it is sometimes critically tedious. The fact that the theoretical apparatus no longer provides the surprise, and then perhaps the strangeness, needs desperately to be examined. But the condition elemented by the grammar emerges, or maybe the grammar elemented by the condition emerges. Sure the often "found text" quality of her work speaks to a possibility of a text made powerless by its automaticness, that risk that much experience-based art suffers (I'm thinking of Surrealism, Dada, Minimalism, even some Abstract Expressionism). But her insistence that this experience never be deflated, or deflected by appropriative gesture, be that through an acquiescence to theory, to the text, or to the culture, or importantly to imagination, speaks to the possibility of this text to reveal the often

conditions of mind and society. No structure is independent here and each is spatially dis-posed and recomposed. [It strikes me that the form she has adopted may be an effort to channel the constant abridgment of this dis-position into a consumable form, a bite-sizing of experience, to effect more of a tension between elements and thereby permit more experiential hinges.] Another thing which may contribute to these pieces' opacity is that they take on an epigrammatic tone and in that some morality which when viewed under a theoretical umbra disengages the personal from the textual, perhaps interrupts the very thing which makes an epigram work. But I'm not so interested in that as a stumbling block to the poems effectiveness. I am concerned with the experience of the poem which insists upon an ideology for its effectiveness.

"I can only hazard it" (85) aside from encapsulating the pronoun shift and the subsequent question of being in action, speaks not only of the hazard of this movement from "I" to "it" but also speaks of the obstacle toward acting and guessing, or thinking. These permutations are held in place (position is so vital here) by the shape of technology. The shape of technology here is much like "a place to put the eye" and the struggle between the technology as in human art and technology as in capital industry, but also the struggle between the personal and the social, the private politic, the body and the "apartment" it is in reveals what "color contends for, eye." The concept of a destabilized I shifting from definite to indefinite, viewer to view is always engaging the machine of that coordinate structure I – technology – eye. These places of contention are constantly destabilized by the viscosity, but they always promote a imaginary bifurcation which is in-effect a dialectic. To go further would be to fill out...

Of course one of if not the most important features of this movie is its sexual composition. As a man, I can not put my finger on it without its touch being an additional technology for the text to contend with. Nonetheless, these "loaded fingerings" (79) bear the same shifts, the same constant limits, or positions that the text is constantly critiquing. This is not only the figural body of the text, but of an oppression which is spelled out in a "finite number of units," a real body. The transparency and calculability of currency, of surplus and exchange require this tension to be placed upon the body and upon the poetics. The internal is never exiled by the external, nor is it ever completely described by it. Most importantly, though, the internal the "inner" is not completely collapsed by or filled by "economic arousal" the text itself is evidence of this, not to mention Diane Ward's existence. The text suffers its own viscosity which engenders an imagination engaged with sexual conditions. If the mind/brain is the largest erogenous zone, what is the mind's eye and what is this eye in the field of social intervention. What is its field of vision?

This is not so much ingratiation of the text, or a display of my enamored economy, as it is a stir of the pot of my considerations. It barely envisions only some of the concerns and even at that sometimes thinly. It would be good to hear any comments.

From: Benjamin Friedlander

Subject: "allowing to sound"

Pardon my abstracting from Patrick's long message on Diane Ward the following passage. The message was addressed in particular to an unnamed interlocutor but was distributed to all of us on the poetics list. I deleted one set of statements from within the passage (marked below by ellipses within brackets) because I didn't quite understand what Patrick was saying and because the technical character of those statements seemed to derive from the "reading" of Diane Ward's *Imaginary Movie*—a book I don't know—and so I was unsure how relevant they are to a discussion of poetry and poetics in general. And I put the word reading in quotes only because of what Patrick himself says, that is:

I don't "read" this text so much as allow it to sound out its own cultural relevance. This is not as passive as it may seem. This sounding invites a text which is an "imaginary form" which insists [**on what? here is where I begin to lose track—b.f.**] no matter how disgruntled I may become with the way the text sits on the page.[**...**] This is the level of engagement. This is personal, it is ideological, it is social. You mention the social as a field of intervention. So often, even [**but why "even"?**] in O'Hara and Reznikoff, I feel the poem is a description of something material, a personalization which elementizes some margin running the gamut from imprisonment (I as the disenfranchized interlocutor of poetic/cultural condition) to oration (I as arbiter of the imaginary condition). This field of intervention I often find less entreating...

I return to this message because I would like to take issue with what I take to be an analogy Patrick is drawing between the two sides of two different distinctions. On the one hand, between reading a text and allowing it to sound (with the implication being that the latter discovers a world of discussion and interaction unavailable to the former); on the other, between two conceptions of the social poem, one that seems performative (Diane Ward), the other linked to modes of representation (O'Hara and Reznikoff). Unstated as such but governing Patrick's remarks (or so I believe) is the twin association of (1) "reading" with "representation" and (2) "allowing to sound" with "performance." Is that correct?

My reconstruction of the argument is necessarily hazy because I'm unsure what this "allowing to sound" actually consists in, and I'm also unsure what sort of social engagement this "allowing to sound" engenders.

I'm all for the discovery of new modes of reading, and for rich phenomenologically tinged accounts of how the poem solicits the reader's attention. I only recently re-read Nick Piombino's essays from *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine and was struck with the depth and beauty of what he describes. His work in that area has not been taken up and I dare say a critical practice that took Nick's theories of reading as its starting point would look different than anything presently being practiced. My problem in the present context is with the promotion of a certain sort of text and a certain sort of "reading" that defines itself by disparaging reading as such. To disavow reading would seem to me to dictate the terms on which the text can be approached. Speaking as a reader, my inclination is to cry foul. Also, however, I wonder what the actual value of this "allowing to sound" can be if it is only applicable to one kind of poem. If it's impossible, for instance, to allow O'Hara's poetry or Reznikoff's "to sound," I wonder if the social engagement discovered in Imaginary Movie is not MORE rather than LESS restrictive.

But these are simply questions that point to a need for clarification. My other interest in all this is more pedestrian: What is the social poem? What ideas about the social poem do we entertain without reflection, and where do we see poets working to articulate newer or deeper ideas about poetry and society?

Patrick mentioned that he is teaching Diane Ward's work and that his musings were inspired by that. By a strange coincidence, my own teaching takes me to a similar line of thinking. I gave my students Langston Hughes's essay "My Adventures as a Social Poet" (from the recently reprinted collection *Good Morning Revolution*). In the coming weeks I'll be trying to figure out how best to teach them Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony*, which in my opinion is a profoundly complex text, not at all a simple collection of voices and stories. After Reznikoff I'm taking up texts that are not poetry, but at the very end of the semester I'm going to try to incorporate Alice Notley's poem "White Phosphorus" (from her book *Homer's Art*) in a more general and historical account of the Vietnam War.

Anyone else working in this area? Any thoughts?

From: Juliana Spahr

Subject: Re: "allowing to sound"

Ben, I too was bothered by the separation of reading and sounding but felt it might be more just another example of the semantic confusion that seems to take over net discussions. (restrictive editing seems to have a direct relation to vocabulary confusions) in these discussions) But I like the larger question of where these take us—how does sounding allow reading; how reading sounding. I think you are right—Piombino is the place to look. Also Dahlen and Howe and at times the essays of Andrews.

But it is your question of what is the social poem that provoked me to finally reply to something on this list. I think the answer is the poem is the social poem. But that is my easily dismissed anti-Adorno (and the rest) optimism speaking that I've finally accepted because the whole thing doesn't seem like it is worth much without it. I liked your teaching narrative mainly because I think I am using a similar area of concern to direct my class—moving from Heart of Darkness to bell hooks' "narratives of struggle" to a study of contrasts between Cullen's "Heritage" and Lindsay's "The Congo" and Hughes "Weary Blues" and Smith's "It A Come" to Apocalypse Now and the accompanying apparatus to Erica Hunt's "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics" to Teresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictee to Leslie Scalapino's "Waking Life." I am trying to examine in just the most basic levels—what is testimony or struggle or opposition.

This has been in some ways the major question of the poetry of the 70s (it might get its most reductive play in the often drawn contrast between the work of Adrienne Rich and the work of, say, Nicole Brossard; Rich seen as the necessity of a narrative and standardized diction for political purposes, Brossard as the necessity for rewriting the language). We all know these arguments. But in some ways they weren't really answered (or at least I feel that way; I am still confused if it necessary to start with the assumption of a standard in order to articulate a right, or a document of rights).

So I am wondering how these issues play out for others, especially in the context of the classroom (which is in some ways a testing ground). I am wondering where others locate the political assumptions of poetry. I am wondering how others fit the aesthetic and social concerns of theorists such as Brecht, Adorno, or more recently, Jameson's call for mapping the postmodern

into the poetic. And I am wondering, Ben, whether you think I have done a great disservice to your word "social" by merging it with my vague "political."

From: Benjamin Friedlander

Subject: the social poem

Juliana, first of all, no, your merging of "social" and "political" doesn't do me a disservice. I admit I was impressed last year when Tom Loebel told me the two are quite distinct—impressed though I myself am hopelessly confused about the difference. Tom I guess had in mind a technical distinction that holds sway in political science (which I believe is what he studied before switching to English), but of course readers and writers of literature don't always recognize that distinction. (Langston Hughes, for instance, in his "Adventures as a Social Poet," speaks of social and political issues—about poverty and about being black in America, but also about the Scottsboro boys, about segregation.)

Nevertheless, the very possibility of a distinction has proven useful. By speaking of the "social" poem, for instance, I would evade some of the cant that collects around the word "political." Also, I hope by returning to a vocabulary that emphasizes the documentary over the activist to reexamine some of our prejudices against the documentary (what you were referring to as "the often drawn contrast between the work of Adrienne Rich and the work of, say, Nicole Brossard; Rich seen as the necessity of a narrative and standardized diction for political purposes, Brossard as the necessity for rewriting the language"). For both those reasons I tend to prefer, like Langston Hughes apparently, to use the word social to refer to both the social and political, rather than using the word political to refer to the political and social (the latter choice being much more common these days—perhaps why you referred to the social as "my" word).

Second, as far as teaching is concerned, ... I seem to be moving toward a course similar to yours. Like you, I'm asking my students "what is testimony or struggle or opposition," and trying to do so (since the class is composition) by engaging them "at just the most basic levels."

I've tried to organize the class around two overlapping sets of questions. (1) What does it mean to speak for "a people"? How is that different than speaking for yourself? Where do the two tasks intersect and where do they part company? (Here the principal texts are Testimony and The Souls of Black Folk.) (2) What does it mean for a writer to take music as a model for writing? (The Souls of Black Folk and DuBois's emphasis on "the sorrow songs.") What

does it mean if the writer's words are not his or her own, or if they're modeled on the language of the courts? (Reznikoff's Testimony.)

Because I prize all the texts I'm teaching, I'm hoping (for myself—forget the students here!) not only to discover what the resources of the so-called "social" poem ARE, but to illuminate these resources as a continuum of values, not a set of mutually exclusive choices (here is where my students really do enter the picture—can I somehow escape my own didacticism in order to make these choices available to them?). Isn't the subtext of the "often drawn contrast" between Brossard and Rich an attempt to proscribe certain forms of writing? And what kind of task is that? I mean, I love Nicole Brossard's work, but doesn't the sanctimoniousness of the sheer use of that work to criticize another's make you want to prefer Adrienne Rich? (And isn't that contrary preference the very essence of an oppositional poetics!) This seems to be a little of what was at stake in the upholding of Diane Ward as versus O'Hara and Reznikoff.

From: Patrick Phillips

Subject: The Socio-political Ward

The responses to my post have generated several questions circling the issue of "reading" as opposed to "sounding". They have also pointed to a tendency toward a lexical pile-up in my writing. I'd like to unpack some of my person to person considerations so that they may be more easily approached by a wider audience. I should say that I had initially sent my reflection on Imaginary Movie to one person in response to some of his questions and perhaps it was unfair to throw this on the List without some attention to detail. I also wish to see if I can give a sense of what I find social and political about reading around IM and "this kind" of text.

As to "I don't 'read' this text so much as allow it to sound out its own cultural relevance," "sound" was primarily used to contrast a broad field of effects with "read" which in my response to the "unnamed interlocutor" referred to a once-through oral reading which was ultimately unsatisfying for him. There is, as Ben points out, a disparagement of reading here, but one which doesn't so much devalue reading as place it in a broad relationship with the imaginary. "Sound" was a con-fusion of effects for me (and for others) – a pun attending to the metaphor of movie, an attempt to allude to a sonar-like (non-visual) means of finding the depth of a text's cultural reference, and a wish to find a measure of intention, or of what utility the imaginary is when "reading" such references. These three characteristics of the rather unstable, and somewhat tired "sound" helped me locate the text and the imaginary in a larger matrix than "read." "Reading" still remains an area of contention. I'll drop "sound" because it has a bad ring to it.

As this idea of reading and sounding may relate to Piombino's "Writing and Imaging," my interest is to "parse" not the "symbolic value of images", but the social value of the "after-images" I find in reading Imaginary Movie. These are subtle, but valuable distinctions which I think may help get to how the text is for me is ideological and thereby social and political.

The distinction between image and after-image is made by Piombino as a kind of "shadowing" – "the image layered on and under, like the creation of an approximate sign." What I find so compelling about Imaginary Movie is Ward's use of these "approximate signs." These after-images layered on and under a textual and imaginary horizon induce a soft focus between these lines.

Ultimately I am interested in what these after-images do, how they interact and what is induced in the "reader" through this interaction. To say the text is comprised of after-images, not signs, but the collusion of approximate signs, promotes an idea of text more like an idea of imagination. Through the blurring of the distinction between language and a cultural imagination the text becomes, or aspires to, a visual representation of the imagination, an "imaginary movie." A reading becomes a viewing, a mix of motivated participation, reading as in "I read you," and unmotivated participation, a mind's-eye view. What is key for me here is that this view does not consist of a "visual field" per se, that there is no object which occupies our retina, either elemented as word, or as imaginary object. There is nothing in our experience that is surrounded by nothing, wholly marked off and distinct. Or, as Merleau-Ponty says, a "visual field is not made up of limited views." Reading urges a participation in fields of reference which are limited views. Viewing has little of the demarcation reading requires, either in the viewed or the viewer.

To a larger experiential condition, I can testify that I have not read IM in five or six days. In spite of lapse, I am always remembering, always suffused with the elements of its experience, the viewings that Imaginary Movie clipped for me. From this experience I sense no distinct visual fields. The sexual takes place within the technological, the value of the economic within the exchange of testament. This, whatever it demonstrates for me, is social. It too takes place in this unframed field of approximate signs, of after-images, of the means toward communication and of the un-ending ends. What is instrumental for me here is that it is not the poem which foments the condition, but the experience that foments the poem. The induction into the functional resistance that awareness builds is social, as evidenced in some small way by my attempts to make it so through letters and postings. It's often difficult to go back and forth between experience and culture this way with poetry that is declarative. I just now opened up "Testimony" into the "South" to a terrible child beating and I must say that family terror has a cultural oscillation we all continually suffer. I was quite uncomfortable with this portrait. Nonetheless what is the difference between this portrait of family violence and that on "911" except for the difference between exhortation (Reznikoff) and exploitation (911). (I am not ridiculing Reznikoff here!) My initial reflection was the horror of the "Die, God damn you!" And then I reflected on the reflection itself, something I cannot wholly do//separate in the experience of IM.

Finally, it is the reading, the response to the references in words like technology, "Industrial Hygiene," in concepts of exchange and power, violence and sexuality, which is important in politicizing this social text. For me it is the

ideology which contorts the reference enough for there to be a soft edge, a value placed upon the after-images so that these approximate signs are motivated. The conditions of culture here become their own critique and thereby our experience, our bodily experience maintains a level of this critique. By and in this there is a politicization of experience, which for me drops away at the moment of reflection. Reflection here is a kind of sustained being, this is what I meant when I said Imaginary Movie insists. To suggest in what it insists would entail this kind of explanation, or something more. One last thing. In my class, there were several different connotations of "political" which proved stumbling blocks, or at least obstacles for definition. Here I want to suggest that the motivation of the imaginary beyond reflection and into some level of sustainable critique is of itself political. Imaginary Movie accomplishes this for me.

From: Benjamin Friedlander

Subject: Re: "911"

Patrick, this is my first attempt to make use of the "reply" function of this system & to play with the so-called "chevrons"—I hope this doesn't go through all wampy-jawed. Anyway, with that proviso, let me try to address your last two posts. In "THE SOCIO-POLITICAL WARD" you say, to explain your preference for Imaginary Movie over Testimony, "It's often difficult to go back and forth between experience and culture this way [i.e., as you do "reading" Diane Ward's work] with poetry that is declarative." Leaving aside for the moment your characterization of Testimony as being "declarative," and leaving aside also the distinction between "experience" and "culture"—I think I agree in principle with both of those assumptions but find them too limited in practice—the point seems to be that the reader's options with regard to a critical engagement with Testimony are limited by the visceral impact of the work. Now, under the heading "911," you elaborate by writing:

> [...] I have been reflecting on the social and cultural/ideological
> crossfire situated by Reznikoff's choice of "examples," his choice of
> line breaks, his use of language and have begun to wonder at what
> length we have to go to get to these cultural intersections that are
> quite different from the "experiential" brought to the fore in texts like
> IM. [...] the social currents instigated in "Testimony" come from a dif
> ferent place, exterior, as examples, yet they are pervasive; we have to go >
out to get at what's in. [...]

I gather you're saying that the complexity of Reznikoff's work (marked by the elaborate artistry of "choice," which hides as artlessness, the basic view of Testimony so far as I can tell from the little bit of the literature on it I've seen—Charles Bernstein's recent Sulfur essay being a notable exception) corresponds in some way with the elaborate "overlays" (as I believe you termed them) of Ward's Imaginary Movie. With this you're establishing an equivalence of sorts between the two—a safeguard in some way from the charge that you are

disparaging Reznikoff—while preserving the distinction you insist on between a text based on the "interior" and one based on the "exterior." Am I reading you right? That the "social currents" of Imaginary Movie are "instigated" (nice word!) from within, directed at the reader, who is the text's exteriority, while the social concern of Testimony somehow enters the poem (as if it wasn't there all along!) from this same place where the reader resides. I think you can see right away the problem I would have with that description of Testimony:

That the distinction between the outside and the inside of the poem doesn't hold up once you begin to speak of reference.

That the mechanics of this reference—by which I mean the poem's relationship with its exteriority—are not sufficiently explained in terms of "crossfire."

That the role of the reader as an intelligence, though it is assumed, is not explored. And that there can be no real understanding of reference without such an exploration.

That the very notion of "declarative" assumes a communication between individuals, and until we address the particular character of this communication in Testimony we will not progress very far in understanding just what sort of social concern this poem expresses.

That it is only by carefully observing how the poem utilizes our intelligence that we can begin to glimpse the intelligence of the poem itself (a formulation I prefer to, but for which you might substitute, the more vexed phrase "intention of the author").

What's noteworthy to me is that you have gone to great lengths to provide this sort of "testimony" (if I might put it so) to the process of reading Diane Ward's work, while relying in your characterizations of Reznikoff on more or less superficial impressions. I don't say this to knock you—not at all—I'm struck that even the best readers of Testimony (Milton Hindus, for instance), despite the evidence of their own research, offer what seem to me superficial descriptions of what reading Reznikoff requires. Here again Charles B's essay is an exception—and though I find his imputation of opacity with regard to Reznikoff's language to be a bit bizarre, what he says about prying words open does I think speak very cogently to the composition of Reznikoff's work. Well, let that hurried depiction of the essay stand for now.

From: Steve Evans

Subject: The Social Poem: for the record

The recent exchange of posts on Diane Ward's Imaginary Movie and on the social poem has added a valuable dimension to my thinking this past week, so let me first register the gratitude I feel towards those who have participated. As the topic evolves, it appears that a hasty response I wrote privately to Patrick on 1 Feb. has come to produce a few effects—through its cited and implied presence at certain stages of his sustained posting to the list on 2 Feb.—within the ensuing discussion. I had hoped to avoid entering this space on what could be construed as a sour note, since my initial response to IM was not a positive one, but I think now that it would be better to trust that P's indefatigable, meticulous, and generous (though I must add, also terminologically baffling) practice of "sounding" Ward's work will more than compensate for whatever criticisms I first thought to advance.

The following two paragraphs, then, are "for the record." I have omitted one unsympathetic comment that concerned the presentation of the work by Potes & Poets Press, otherwise I have avoided the impulse to amend or elaborate these comments. Because I do, however and alas, have more to say, I will tax everyone's patience with a second posting that will follow on the heels of this one.

ORIGINAL NOTE:

Dear Patrick:

Just a quick note to see if I can draw you out on the title poem of the book you will be discussing on Wednesday. I read the poem this evening, aloud, and gave some thought to it. But I must admit, it felt more like anemic cinema than imaginary movie. Jen tells me that this book, and specifically this poem, has been an important one for you, and I trust that this means I am missing something. Technically, the repeated six-line stanzas struck me as only erratically interesting as a unit of composition: the stakes are low, mistakes are hard to discern (can they be made?). Less sonically engaging than, say, some of the work in couplets in *Relation*. A certain, quite familiar, indistinction at the level of lexicon: I'll trade the whole gamut of pronouns (the deployment of which strikes me as tired even in Ashbery) for a few committing descriptives (but then I like Reznikoff and O'Hara because I like the social as a field of

intervention). Though I can anticipate certain points of contact with a theoretical apparatus (most obviously, of course, feminist film theory circa Mulvey), which, patiently articulated, would "fill out" the poem, I am concerned for both the poem's and the theory's autonomy: there is a trace of what Barthes called "the blackmail of theory" (i.e. here's an aesthetic object such as your theory predicts for) here.

Which is not to put you, or the poem for that matter, on the defensive. I'm just ticking down a list of resistances that are more likely to originate in my hasty and perhaps insufficiently attentive reading than in the text. What I could use is some "testimony" regarding the coordinates you've found to provide a thicker and more moving engagement with the poem. Estrin's public/ private remark doesn't help me so far: much too sweeping and indiscriminate to provide guidance (what isn't appropriable under this rubric?). Ditto the concept of political (and for the same reason). ...

From: Steve Evans

Subject: The Social Poem

I want to follow up on my posting "for the record" with a few thoughts that are perhaps a little more substantial. In light of the postings by Juliana, Ben, Ken, and Patrick himself, it would appear that the salient moment in my private reply to Patrick is the somewhat flippant graph of my own value-constellation represented by the claim that "I would trade the whole gamut of pronouns...for a few committing descriptives (but then I like Reznikoff and O'Hara because I like the social as a field of intervention)." Upon consideration, I think this largely gestural move on my part introduces some untenable polarizations (Ward vs. Reznikoff & O'Hara; lexical indeterminacy vs. social commitment). In brief, I throw down a gauntlet that I feel fairly certain none of us on this list would consent to run. But if there is something redeemable in this remark, it might be in the connection (albeit so enjambed as to be indiscernible) between "value" and the "social."

My thinking in this area owes a debt to Bakhtin/Medvedev's *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, and especially to the discussion of "social evaluation" that is found on pages 119-28. I will excerpt just three claims made in this book. First, and mainly as a corrective to personalizing the theme of value, I would recall their statement that "the notion that evaluation is an individual act is widespread in contemporary 'Lebensphilosophy,' and leads to conclusions no less false. Evaluation is social; it organizes intercourse" (126). The second claim is perhaps more specifically relevant to our discussion. M/B argue that "social evaluation is needed to turn a grammatical possibility into a concrete fact of speech reality" (123), basing this on their premise that "the utterance is not a physical body and not a physical process" [something some of us might wish to contest, certainly], but rather "a historical event, albeit an infinitesimal one. Its individuality is that of a historical achievement in a definite epoch under definite social conditions" (121). Finally, because it serves to indicate their more general take on "value" and its relation to "formal" decisions, there are the following sentences: "Social evaluation organizes how we see and conceptualize the event being communicated, for we only see and conceptualize what interests or affects us [or as Stein says: It is very likely that nearly everyone has been very nearly certain that something that is interesting is interesting them]. Social evaluation also organizes the forms by which the event is communicated: the arrangement of the material into digressions,

returns, repetitions, etc., is permeated with the single logic of social evaluations" (127).

M/B conceive of "social value" as the medium that pervades, supports, and constrains the generation of specific meanings from the field of linguistic (or grammatical) possibilities. It is their answer to the question of why such a limited number of linguistic combinations result in the production of "sense" (and thus to the opposition of narrow vs. broad band that Pat termed "reading" v. "sounding"). Zukofsky had, I think, something similar going on when he wrote: "Impossible to communicate anything but particulars—historic and contemporary—things, human beings as things their instrumentalities of capillaries and veins binding up and bound up with events and The revolutionary word if it must revolve cannot escape having a reference. It is not infinite. Even the infinite is a term" ("An Objective" in *Prepositions*, 16).

My answer to Ben's question of "what is the social poem" would then be: that poetic practice which proceeds by "particulars" as they circulate in the social medium of value. There are other media, other practices, other ways of fashioning the particular. There are words that wobble out of orbit and do escape having a reference (or at least first order reference, though they are usually recuperated at the level of the social through categories like "nonsense," "difficult writing," "writing elites do and I don't understand," etc.). To pick up on Juliana's list of people thinking about this question, I think Bruce Andrews calls this "horizoning" in his *Politics of Poetic Form* essay (Roof 1990). In short, I recognize the "unframed field of approximate signs" (as Patrick so memorably puts it) as a possibility of writing, but as a possibility that the "social poem" as I understand it refuses to convert into an end in itself.

I would attribute Patrick's provocative unwillingness to distinguish between *Testimony* and *Rescue 911* to an unwillingness to conceptualize social value (though as Peter Gizzi pointed out to me, the word "rescue" does resonate in Reznikoff's project, though more in a Benjaminian direction of "redemptive critique" than in the frame of network television, which is directly where my students took it also when I taught Rez's book last semester). So many decisive levels of mediation are manhandled in this analogy that I doubt Patrick would "upon reflection" stand by it. Likewise, though, the concept of "reflection" as he uses it fails to distinguish between the hyper-presentation of a presence (i.e. contemporary barbarism ala *Cops & Rescue 911*) and Reznikoff's preserving of an absent present through testimony (i.e. a project oriented to the redemption of historic and contemporary suffering, always particular in Zuk's sense). The eerie affectlessness of much of *Testimony* couldn't be further from the

adrenaline-soaked stimulations of exploitation t.v. Nor is the "exhortation" dogmatic; it is ethical in any meaningful sense of that term.

I apologize for the length of this posting, which exceeds by several screens my own e-mail attention span It's just that these topics are central to my own thinking, and to the values that direct that thinking: poetry and social emancipation.

From: Benjamin Friedlander

Subject: the social poem

Steve, I have what I suppose must be an antinomian streak that forces me, often against my will, to take issue with positions that in fact attract me a great deal. Something of the sort occurs now, reading your eminently useful contribution to the discussion of the social poem. Take issue with is too strong—to question, and so, perhaps, modify.

What you say about value seems both right and necessary. The implications with regard to our discussion are significant. That evaluation is a social form, an activity whose meaning and whose value, constituting an "historical event," is objective (in a sense that clarifies what Zukofsky and Reznikoff had in common as "objectivists," i.e., more than some sentimental attachment to Pound's dictum "direct treatment of the thing"), that the subjective is therefore no less "objective" than those forms of evaluation which call themselves objective (i.e., that subjectivity no less than objectivity has a social content and a political form), that the individual is derived from the social and not the other way around—these are all helpful correctives to the "untenable polarizations" (as you put it) that at every turn threaten to undermine discussions of poetry, to turn discussion into an argument between schools. Not that there aren't differences between Ward and Reznikoff—of course there are—but that the differences we have been attempting to identify as essential between their projects occur first of all within them.

To take one example: if "social value" is "the medium that pervades, supports, and constrains the generation of specific meanings from the field of linguistic (or grammatical) possibilities," then the "social value" of Reznikoff's *Testimony* will be most directly evident in those places where his actions are ostensibly individual—his choices, his juxtapositions, the ways he alters the original material. The "social value" of the material itself, which we might naively assume to be an unmediated glimpse at the United States, is in fact measurable only by way of a regression to the archimedean point of individuality where the social first allows itself to be glimpsed. To take the social content of the poem as an unmediated view of the social field out of which the poem is lifted would be to forget that the social is mediation. (And in this forgetting the "eerie affectlessness of much of *Testimony*" begins to be felt.) The poem thus flips the relation we might expect to find between the social and the individual: "outside" the poem, the individual is a construct of

the social; "inside," the social is a construct of the individual. This is not to insist, however, on a dichotomy between inside and outside—or rather, it's to insist that the dichotomy occurs equally on both sides of the mythical boundary that the dichotomy is said to put into effect. NOT that Imaginary Movie works from within while Testimony works from without, but that in each work a dynamic is established between inner and outer, subjective and objective, social and personal. The singularity of the poem rests precisely here, in the character of the dynamic that governs the poem's meaning.

Or if I might say that again, a little more simply, the distinction between individual and social has to occur within the poem, in order for the poem to be intelligible according to either category. That, in any case, is the logic of Bakhtin/Medvedev's formula, which conceives of individuality as an historical achievement, a social form.

And it's in light of this analysis that I feel drawn to question your definition of the social poem. Much as I share the values that your definition privileges—"poetic practice which proceeds by 'particulars' as they circulate in the social medium of value"—I wonder that the emphasis on "particulars" doesn't attempt to establish yet another dichotomy between poems that only makes sense within them, here between the particular and the general. You refer, of course, to "other media, other practices, other ways of fashioning the particular" (but since these would have to be circulations in a "medium of value" other than the social, I wonder what they can be), and you refer also to poetic practices "that wobble out of orbit and do escape having a reference" (and you qualify this, but again I wonder what sort of work you are referring to—and I wonder also at the equation of particularity with reference). Nevertheless, I think the upholding of particularity as opposed to generality—or to be more accurate, a proceeding by particularity instead of generality—only makes sense if "as opposed to" is understood as occurring IN the poem. And if that's the case, then the generality is as essential as the particularity. And isn't that in fact the case in every poem? For surely there are no purely particularist or purely generalizing poetries ...

This isn't simply a matter of logics and abstract argumentation. Something occurs in Reznikoff that seems to both of us illuminating about poetry in general and the social poem in particular. For both of us, the specificity of Reznikoff's content and the redemptive quality of his formal appropriations of that content are not only striking but exemplary. I would want to say, however, that too great an emphasis on the historical moment Testimony enshrines and on the apparent lack of mediation in the poem's presentation of this moment blinds us to the insistent leveling of particularity that also occurs, and the

shrewd, often polemical presence of the author in the ways this leveling is interrupted. It's interesting that my students last week noted first of all—somewhat complainingly—the repetitiousness of the book, the endless permutations of violence and neglect was "predictable," they said. We spent a lot of time talking about courts and law and what testimony is in that context, and after a while they grasped that not all testimony is true. They began to notice, also, Reznikoff's sarcasm, and the fact that not all meets the eye in these stories. Of course this only annoys them further since if there's anything they hate more than the depressing it's the subtle—Testimony being both. All of which is to say that the particularity has meaning above all because of the clarity with which Reznikoff organizes it conceptually.

I could say more about Testimony in this regard, but the message is long enough. A quote then from Charles Bernstein's Sulfur essay:

"I've been told that Reznikoff disliked obscurity and would certainly not have wanted his work to be characterized as obscure. Yet Reznikoff, from the beginning, seemed to expect that obscurity was the likely outcome for his poetic work and seemed to accept that with remarkable equanimity. Perhaps he understood the nature, the social structure, of obscurity better than his contemporaries. Neglect, disregard—the socially obscure, the forgotten and repressed, the overlooked—this was his subject. Hiding in plain sight you may never be found: if sight is not to 'See by but to look at,' not to use but behold."

I like that.

From: Charles Bernstein

Subject: Community and the Individual Talent

I had a number of thoughts, over these past weeks of posts, about community, but I've misplaced them.

Every time I hear the words literary community I reach for my bivalent autocad simulation card emulator.

Poetry is (or can be) an aversion of community in pursuit of new constellations of relationship.

In other words, community is as much what I am trying to get away from – reform – as form.

So there are a spectrum of communities, from the closed community modeled on the family, to communities fixed by location (what might otherwise be called, for example, neighborhoods) or civic identification (the community bounding a literal and figurative commons or commonplace) or political ideology, to utopian communities that have either sought to form a new place or to remain open by refusing to be grounded by a place.

Literary communities have often been understood in terms of place – the "local" – as Michael Davidson writes about the emergence of a literary community on the West Coast in his book on the SF Renaissance, or in terms of scene (a local hub within a place) or group. Black Mountain remains crucial because it forged an arts community from writers and artists from many places. Most recently, the connections of writers within ethnic, gender, or racial groups have been designated as communities. Schools or movements have not usually been called communities, although Ron Silliman, among others, have wanted to insist that a shared aesthetic project among writers in different locations can best be understood on this model of community. It's possible to speak of the "poetry community" in the sense of "the poetry world" (in the sense of "the art world") – but such a formulation immediately suggests that arts funding agencies are nearby (more commonly, one speaks of the "small press community"). I would say "poetry communities" but this begs the questions even as it suggests relief. Many poets that I know experience poetry communities, say scenes, as places of their initial exclusion from publication,

readings, recognition. Being inside, a part of, is often far less striking than being left out, apart.

Communities, defined by what they have in common – a place, an ideal, a practice, a heritage, a tradition – cannot immunize themselves against what they do not find common. To have a community is to make an imaginary inscription against what is outside the community. & outside is where some poetry will want to be. That is, some poetry will want to work against received ideas of place, group, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, person, member, individuality, tradition, aesthetic tendency. One does not use collective nouns, or at least not without skepticism (if not anxiety).

Robert von Hallberg, in *Culture & Value*, argues for a poetry that reflects community values; this is what he calls a poetry of accommodation and also, for the U.S. in the 1970s and 80s, a suburban poetry.

I suppose it has something to do with how comfortable you feel about the confines of family or nation (fine or confining). As the critic asked the poet who had slipped on the ice and was lying in the middle of the road – "Are you comfortable?" – "I make a good living."

(I take it Steve Evans' comment in his introduction to the "Technique" in *o.blek/Writing from the New Coast* about his generational "hatred of identity" could also apply to a hatred of community, and perhaps that is implicit in his recent discussion of "hating society properly" and also "hating" tradition. Would this include a hatred of virtual, or for that matter unavowable, communities? Echoing W.C. Fields' famous repost to being corrected about his insistence that Jews were running the Studio – Catholics, worst kind of Jews – might we say: Virtual communities, worst kind of communities!?)

Any discussion of community would do well to start with the idea of institution rather than association. For the rules of our associations, one on one or one with many, is fundamentally an institutional matter (in the sense that Erving Goffman details in his many works). So that I would say the first fact about the "community" made possible through modems hooked up to mainframes that are teleconnected is that the access and protocols of this community are predetermined by the institutions that give us entry into them; for most of us on this particular list "membership" in the university "community" – (and for the few on commercial services bearing the insignia of ".com" at the end of their e-mail addresses, they have simply paid to have access to this already formed nexus.)

This is changing but that only makes more crucial the need to acknowledge the overlay of different institutional interests that mediate our interactions in these spaces. We don't shed old institutional habits as we inhabit new institutional spaces so much as project our old ways onto the new spaces. A great deal of sociological analysis is sure to follow us here. But it is interesting to consider, what patterns of "who speaks?" in "live" group settings – meetings, seminars – are also present in listserv situations, which may at first appear to be free of the need to interrupt or speak up or find a temporary opening in the discussion.

For example, I will soon begin monitoring how long each of you spends online with Poetics@UBVM or whether and what you download. – The potential for monitoring such transactions, as well as doing various forms of statistical analysis of posts and activity, is part of the medium of our communing here. Several subscribers have noted that one of us has chosen to conceal his identity from the publicly available list of subscribers; am I right to "out" Chris Funkhouser of our SUNY-Albany node?

I have set up this listserv so that anyone can subscribe and I am automatically notified, but also so that the list itself is not listed in any directories of listserves. At some point, to keep the list at a scale small enough, or "common" enough, to work, will it be worth considering eliminating open subscriptions?

The idea of possibly hidden listeners is something a listserv invokes insofar as the communication is considered interpersonal, private in the way a letter is, or even a seminar or meeting; although we accept that we never know who buys our books (or checks them from the library). But perhaps the situation here is more like a performance, where we make our recits individually to an audience that is able to see one another, even if, when on stage, our view of the audience may be blocked by the kleiglits.

That, anyway, would bring to mind Rousseau's preference for public meetings over and against public spectacles (theater): the public convenes to consider its circumstance, its common needs.

What is public space and why does there seem so little of it, as if the public had become a commodity no longer in much demand, but still available for import at high prices, free trade notwithstanding? (We import it from ourselves and the tariffs are high.) So little public space, that is, so much public spectacle.

This suggests the civic values of spaces like these: not reinforcing existing communities but taking up the constitution of social space.

If I resist the idea of a literary community, while working to support the "actually existing" communities of poets among which I find myself, it is because I want to imagine reading and writing, performing and listening, as sites of conversation as much as collectivity. I want to imagine a constellation of readers who write, to and for one another, with the links always open at the end, spiraling outward – centrifugally – not closing in.

At one point in these parts, posts – a message identified as from Lolpoet (Loss Glazier), echoed G.E. Moore's shaking of fists at the skeptics ("at least I know two things that are real!"): "We are physical beings, not virtual ones." My heart sank, for it is our virtuality that allows for hope. V139HLA3 (at Buffalo it is an institutional privilege to have your name be used as part of your user ID), aka Martin Spinelli, wanting to put off the idea that this space of exchange is unreal, insisted, "We are really here with our real eyes at real monitors" ...: yet, my real eyes do me no good if I aspire to something else than what I see, and what I want to monitor is neither real or unreal.

So my hope for electronic communication is not that it engenders virtual communities, but rather virtual uncommunities.

From: Sandra Braman

Subject: Community

I get a little nervous with extensive discussions about formation of community, actually, for it often seems to take the place of engaging in the activities in the doing of which we become one ...

There are of course cultural aspects to the net community thing, as elsewhere. Native Americans (who are seeking sovereignty in cyberspace as well as in material space), for example, are concerned about the clash between net culture and their own. In most Native American societies, the most important people are those who are silent in public and sit at the back of the room, while it is the younger and less influential folks who make the noise. Obviously, this would be problematic in the effort to sustain their culture within the net. (There are many examples, actually, of the use of new information technologies in the sustenance of traditional cultural forms, but there are other examples, as well, where this is problematic.)

About four years ago, after attending a string of 7 conferences from Moscow in the former USSR through eastern and western Europe and Eastern and Middle US (winding up in Urbana), I was quite struck by the difference in terms and conceptualizations used to talk about what were often the very same matters facing the formation of communication policy. In the former Warsaw Pact countries, there is great and explicit concern about the possibility of civil society; in Western Europe, concern over the sustenance of the public in a time when media were becoming privatized; in the US, it's all audience and, as individuals, we've moved from citizens to consumers. In the case of this list, from my perspective, one of the things that makes it a community is a sense of shared substance, including sharing with those who may not be speaking much. Silence and listening are the undervalued communications practices of our time

From: Susan Schultz

Subject: Community Games

The discussion of community that I've recently tapped into is interesting, from a mid-Pacific perspective, for what it leaves out—only proving, I suppose, that definitions of community are inevitably context driven, "community games," as it were. In Hawaii, the term "local" is a racial as well as a regional tag; to be "local" here is to be Asian-American, which distinguishes "locals" from native Hawaiians, and haoles (whites). It's possible, though not easy, to be a "local haole," if you grow up here. Increasingly, that definition of "local" enters into local writing through the use of pidgin; Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Saturday Night at the Palhala Theater* (Bamboo Ridge Press, 1993) is written exclusively in pidgin (except for a moment of affected standard English, meant to be laughed off).

A couple of weeks ago I went to a reading for the publication of Jessica Hagedorn's fascinating anthology, *The Death of Charlie Chan*. The first two readers, Yamanaka and a gay Filipino American writer, Zack Linmarck, read in a language so local (and so infused with particular cultural references) that I had a keen sense of living outside of it (I've been in Hawaii for three and a half years now). And yet I'm reminded of what Charles Bernstein said a few days ago about uncommunities—I feel myself a part of this community precisely because it is one that acknowledges a multitude of contexts; even though I'm not "local" I do have investments in the community. I am both inside and out of the game, especially when I set about "teaching" local literature at UH. My feeling about this discussion group is similar; it strikes me that the community's self-definition will change often, according to the particular contexts of our musings. Perhaps, to follow Gene Hult's comment, we should turn to poems—poems that contain within themselves these shifts of context which are the community as it exists inside poems. It also strikes me as a potentially productive exercise to examine poems that do not seem to welcome us into their community, since that exclusion (gender, class, or race-related) is part and parcel of our definition.

As an aside on pidgin writing: I'm interested in the way in which local writing is (finally) catching on on the mainland. Yamanaka is widely published, as are Eric Chock and Wing Tek Lum, to say nothing of Cathy Song, though her work isn't generally considered to be local—her audience, as she put it horribly in the pages of *Manoa*, is the workshop writer she was most jealous of. Garrett

Hongo's new anthology *The Open Boat* (a strange title for a collection of Asian American poetry—what DOES Stephen Crane have to do with it?) includes several Hawaii writers, and should make them more popular to a larger audience. But, although the use of an exclusive, non-universal language, pidgin, should attract the attention of "Language writers," the poems themselves are relentlessly conservative, more intent on mimesis than on any challenge to it. They buy into notions of "authenticity" that grate on literary critical ears.

In what sense, then, will a discussion group like this one welcome in the "multicultural" literature of places like Hawaii? How do we want to define multiculturalism? We need to keep in mind that "experimental writing" is also a context-driven phenomenon. What is experimental here isn't in Buffalo, and probably vice versa. (Though Hagedorn's anthology puts the Heath in the dust on that score.)

Anyway, I find myself piling on here. I'll sign off for now.

From: Patrick Phillips

Subject: The Wobbly Social Poem

The exposure of a personal/public here speaks on at least a couple fronts. One is as a formal gesture toward "the other" conversation on "community." Another, and the one I'll attend directly to, is a notion of frame, or field. My desire, as Steve suggests, not to "conceptualize a notion of social value" is so bound in my appreciation of unframed field of approximate signs that some people may see this as a destabilization of particulars. That this destabilization could in turn lead to the demise of a critique, even my own sense (or lack thereof) of contiguity, and could thereby promote an ugly conjunction of "911" and Testimony. In the terms of the political question arises: How can a critical theory lack a particular ideological framework and is it this a lack of particularity that conjoins such things? Although the first part of the question is somehow more interesting it is the second part that I think has more relevance in terms of the "social poem." (For some reason this idea, the "social poem," seems anemic, like generic drug; something's hiding in there.)

On the surface of things, like words, I "wobble out of orbit," often as a matter of course. In my wobble the terms of argument become indiscrete; however, this is not to say that this wobbling undermines my reference, nor does this wobble undermine a word's reference. Here lies the kicker. At what point does this wobble become an element of theory distracted from the social discourse (a point brought up in Steve's initial personal, now public post)? And at what point is this wobble a "social evaluation." My wobble is social, not theoretical. Its point of arrival is quite close to its point of departure. It would appear that this is an important point, one that in my book is an edge of confluence which resists conceptualization, but one which is constantly demanding it.

Here's one of the reasons I included that "private" post. What I've just begun to try to uncover are the similarities in the expedient forms in Imaginary Movie and Testimony. What are the motives, how are texts, words motivated in spite and because of their wobble. Testimony veils a culture just out of reach both temporally (the turn of the century) and, spatially through the constantly misplaced modifier ("The United States"). This veil positions the reader, creates a point of reference from which judgements are made and then, through "subsequent" portraits, those judgements are stressed in to a re-making. The coordinate structure of Testimony forces a de-limitation of reference points while never relieving the reader of a concise condition. This reinforced

delimitation is in itself often an ethical and moral co-ordinate structure which in many ways could be likened to a "structure" of Imaginary Movie. However, the temporal shift that the reader must engage in is a relentless positioning. This situation, though the terms of its economic and social critique are current, becomes fused with the nostalgic. In other words, because of "its" reflective composition Testimony is a compromised dis-position. Just how Testimony resists falling apart in the echo of its own distance, or just how in its portrait is not of his grandfather, or of our grandparents, but stays here, now, is a matter of technique, economics and morality. It is also a matter of its instability. In that instability its reference is clear.

For Reznikoff, the wobble is stated in action, the unsaid, a testament of the given in the form of our activity. That for Ward this unsaid is in the abridgement of meaning, doesn't alter this engagement so much as it alters the textual form it takes. What is stated in both texts differs dramatically from what is experienced in each text. The linguistic wobble in Ward is radically different from the conceptual wobble evident in Rez., but its object remains the same, its reference is clear. If we are to rely upon the term, or the area of definition as the condition of the "revolutionary word," a concept which for me remains highly suspect, we still have to engage those areas of ideology and the social which defy boundary in order to discover the term.

This doesn't answer anything, but continues to set up a range of problems for further rumination

From: Steve Evans

Subject: the social poem: recitative

"A reading that is watched over" (as Ben puts it) seems not a bad definition of this list. It certainly revalues the participation of those, clearly the majority of subscribers, whose "presence" is otherwise referred in a more ominous direction by the term "lurking." But then, who's to say angels/intelligences (at least the sort whom this list is likely to attract) don't lurk? Rilke's did ...

Culling over the thread, testing my sense of what has been said to date, I find myself thinking of Juliana's comment that "the poem is the social poem." By which Juliana might mean politely to say that "social" doesn't really advance our thinking beyond the point "poem" has already brought it to. ...

In which case, shifting the question to "what is testimony or struggle or opposition" seems a more generative option than the one I've noticed my own thoughts to be drifting into: i.e. placing an article before an adjective (the social) and counting the resulting abstraction as a cognitive gain. Truth is, everything that lead me to introduce the term in my note to Patrick is lost once that abstraction has occurred.

The Jameson of Marxism and Form has an interesting take on why this swivel (more determined than a wobble) between concretion/abstraction might haunt our mediations on society. He notes that "society is clearly not some empirical object which we can meet and study directly in our own experience: in this sense the neo-positivist criticism, which considers the idea of society an inadmissible abstract construct or a mere methodological hypothesis with no other kind of real existence, is justified. At the same time society—precisely in the form of such an impossible, suprapersonal abstraction—is present in the form of an ultimate constraint upon every moment of our waking lives [he's clearly an optimist vis-a-vis the unconscious!]: absent, invisible, even untenable, it is at the same time the most concrete of all the realities we have to face.... (57).

That doesn't seem a bad way of parsing the problem "society" poses for thought and linking it to the one it poses for (everyday) practice.

As for poetic practice, I will tempt the anti-Adornian in Juliana only slightly by rewriting an admirable phrase from *Minima Moralia*: "you must have tradition

in you to hate it properly." In the context of this discussion, I would say: the poem must have society in it to hate it properly. Against one variant of the "necessity for rewriting the language" argument Juliana mentioned, I would add: society is neither reducible to, nor even "structured like" a language.... One could, hypothetically, "hate" the structures of signification, and one could (though not without paradoxes) even practice that hatred or opposition in one's writing, but that would not be, in my definition, necessarily the same thing as "hating society properly."

But to get that word, "hate," to have the inflection I want, I'll need a couple of stanzas from O'Hara:

Poem

Hate is only one of many responses
true, hurt and hate go hand in hand
but why be afraid of hate, it is only there
think of filth, is it really awesome
neither is hate
don't be shy of unkindness, either
it's cleansing and allows you to be direct
like an arrow that feels something
out and out meanness, too, lets love breathe...

The fact is that oppositional practices can stay clear of neither hate nor violence: that Reznikoff's Testimony admits and re-cites (while refusing to turn into arias) scene after scene of hate and violation releases us into a comportment beyond fear and amazement, beyond the "awe" that O'Hara speaks of. Testimony refers us not to the unmediated traumatic occurrence, but to the comportment that might make such occurrences impossible: "why be afraid of hate, it is only there"—why be afraid of hate, in other words, when the absence of our ability to respond to it is what truly is fearful?

But Benjamin said it better in 1939:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge— unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable ("Theses on the Philosophy of History").

This opens the wider question of what view of history would be tenable, and what relationship Reznikoff bears to the history he writes and the history he, albeit infinitesimally, and from within the social-structure of obscurity, helped to make.

From: Benjamin Friedlander

Subject: Re: The Wobbly Social Poem

I want to reserve my right, as they say, to say something at a later date about the "intelligence" that reading calls upon, or substantiates. I've mentioned to Patrick already that for me the word alludes to those angelic orders which Henry Corbin says Islamic mysticism terms "intelligences." I've been reading Corbin nibblingly as a way of finding a new path into Olson's poetry, which many of us here in Buffalo are now reading for the Creeley seminar. I want to say that there's an angel of reading, and most of what is sort of stupidly accounted for as "self-reflection" really makes more sense when understood as a reading that is watched over. I want also to say that it's impossible for me to think about the so-called "social" poem without reference to its opposite. Which would be, to my mind, not the antisocial poem (the antisocial is no less social than the law abiding), but the poem concerned with what's trans-social, trans-historical, mystical, ontological. And I think this opposition is again one that only makes sense within a poet's work, is not a means of categorizing the differences between poets. Reznikoff is an easy example of this—though not perhaps in Testimony—since in Judaism the trans-historical uses the historical as its referent, and Reznikoff's ideas and imagery in large part derives from Judaic sources. (See, for instance, "Jerusalem the Golden.") But Olson too is a wonderful example of the social poem giving way to its opposite, only to be rediscovered in the most improbable manifestations.

OK. I save all that for later—or rather, I offer it as a possible direction. And in the meantime I wonder just what "wobble" means. Patrick?

> On the surface of things, like words, I "wobble out of orbit," often as a
> matter of course. In my wobble the terms of argument become indis-
> crete; however, this is not to say that this wobbling undermines my ref-
> erence, nor does this wobble undermine a word's reference.

A habit of communication. But this habit would seem to be "revolving" toward an articulation that is itself revolution. That is, the undecidability of your immediate meaning demonstrates a stance that is ultimately opposed to the immediacy of understanding which communication seems to depend on.

- > My wobble is social, not theoretical. Its point of arrival is quite close to
- > its point of departure. It would appear that this is an important point,
- > one that in my book is an edge of confluence which resists
- > conceptualization, but one which is constantly demanding it.

If I'm right then I would have to say your wobble is social and yet in a wholly theoretical sense—theory enacted as a social relation. Moreover, your attempts to resist not only demand conceptualization, they can be intelligible only to the extent that we (your interlocutors) do conceptualize them.

Is this how poetry operates? That what poems "do" is intelligible only insofar as we accept this doing as a "saying." That what poems "say" makes invisible the fact that this saying is also a "doing." Here we return to Charles Bernstein's comment on Reznikoff about hiding in plain sight. There's a Blaser poem too that comes to mind:

THE TRUTH IS LAUGHTER

Locked out, and at the same time locked

in the look-out what perfect rose could

I say or write the Nietzschean brilliance,

who knew that the best writers understand

form as what others consider content

We're probably not too far either from the old "How does a poem mean?" line that I got in high school. But I too would like to write or say the perfect rose. And why has wobbling got to be so dramatic? What if this very sentence, held out to you as simply as a plucked flower, turns methodically on an axis, round some sun of meaning toward its point of origin?

From: Jennifer Moxley

Subject: Wobbly Institutions?

I think you boys must be getting a little saddle weary from all that wobbling. Those who muse around in definitions of community without self-referentiality obviously can "step away" long enough to question: are we in one? do we want one? etc... Most people on this earth are born into your vagary. And I think the likelihood of any significant change happening surrounding community is very low among our current poetic dissidents if we don't feel "wrongly defined" only "wrong definitions" –changing definitions is easy, we're poets, or are we? I noticed that M. Hult admitted he goes to the grocery store which reminded me of something I read about the new left in the 60's, it's not that anyone said to the women leftists, "you can't speak," it is simply that the dynamic was such that even theoretically sophisticated women felt invigorated but shut down from participation. The way they were defined proceeded any definition changing they might have wanted to take part in. Being left out, cut off from the dominant modes of whatever, while remaining in a position of privilege via class and gender, can sometimes make us forget to keep a keen eye peeled on the house that shut the door in the first place, and subsequently our shack takes on an inflated importance. I find it interesting that while we spend a lot of time opposing our enforced and chosen communities we still accept their terms. I think this is because it isn't that we hate our communities, but rather that we hate that the possibilities they open to us (academic, poetic, love relationships, virtual and democratic communities) are rarely realized. I just hate that. But it's like always waking up to a sink full of dirty dishes, you must say to yourself, at least I have dishes. We cannot extirpate ourselves from community any more than we can talk about the social as if we aren't in and defined by it, neither can we give up hope that we might be able to risk humiliation and defy these spaces that define us.

From: Dodie Bellamy

Subject: Spicer's Martian dialect

... A quote from John Ryan:

Jack Spicer and I were both fluent in Martian. I was North Martian, and he was South Martian, but we understood what we said perfectly well. We were going down into the Valley one year, before Christmas, on a train, and Jack had to go take a leak. Jack and I had been conversing in Martian, being quite full of Red Cap Ale, and a guy from another table came over and asked me when Jack went to the head, "Are you fellows Australian?" Jack returned and greeted the man, "Sit ka vassisi von ka, sta'chi que v'ay gray." ("Salut!".) That's Southern Martian. "Eiss! Sa schlein! Ja da lond, nar la loff." (That's "thank you," in Northern Martian.)" (from KK's Spicer bio--I am devouring the manuscript with great pleasure)

From: Ron Silliman

Subject: Ghosts vs. Martians

Dodie's comments re Spicer made me think about the fact that there are TWO categories of communicative Other in Spicer's work. Martians is one, but ghosts are the other. What I want to know is What is the difference between these two realms for Spicer?

Am totally envious that you get to read that book while I, like the rest of the world, just have to wait.

From: Dodie Bellamy

Subject: Re: Ghosts vs. Martians

Ron,

I have spent the morning bugging Kevin about what he sees as the difference between Martians and ghosts. KK seems to think that they are, in fact, metaphors for the same phenomenon—which particular term Spicer chose often depending on who he was talking to. KK said that Martians seemed to drop away after a while, and ghosts took over as the predominant image. KK doesn't see much connection between the Martian dialect and this, seeing speaking Martian simply as a game that lovers play.

Have you ever made up a language with another, Ron? I have.

And, yes, I do feel lucky reading this book. But I also feel lucky about my long-term, totally passive exposure to Spicer's work and world, which began long before KK started the Spicer bio. Early on in my writing career Bruce Boone would read me Spicer and discuss his poetry and Bruce's vision of community. I remember Bruce having a party where a large group of us sat around his Noe Valley apartment and listened to a tape of Spicer reading *The Holy Grail*. And then there was the Spicer conference at New College. And John Granger's striking talk on Spicer at Small Press Traffic.

And I've been particularly lucky in having met many of the people discussed in the Spicer bio. There's something very gratifying about having myself developed as a writer in San Francisco, and being emersed in this historical community which still has traces in the present. Recently KK, Peter Gizzi, and I went to the memorial service of the painter Tom Field, who was part of the Spicer circle. As I was leaving, Joanne Kyger and a number of other survivors of that era took what remained of the wine and headed up to Tom's room to drink because they could feel Tom there. Ghosts.

From: Maria Damon

Subject: Re: Ghosts vs. Martians

like kevin via dodie, i'm not sure how much is gained by looking for differences btw ghosts and martians in spicer. in my spicer chapter i treat them as slightly different inflections of spicer's felt affinity for otherworldliness(es) in his life: as a poet, as a gay man, etc. I'd say that there is in ghosts a resonance w/ keats's negative capability and eliot's anti-personality aesthetics ("what i am is by degrees a ghost"—letter to lorca in *After Lorca*), and in martians there's a sense (through appeal to cavalcantian appeals to mars as the "real" god of love as opposed to venus) of bellicose agonism, which certainly characterizes spicer's relationship to "the world"—and also, given the space-race fifties and sixties, to the concept of a fantasy/utopian projection where things could come true and whence "different" people came (somewhere over the rainbow, burroughs's "language is a virus from outer space," sun ra, etc, "my favorite martian" as a mass cultural model for alternate masculinity). etc. i had some ideas about 8 years ago of writing something about the iconography of the space-race and the emergent gay male community of the 50s and 60s, but like so many other ideas i never did it, nor could i persuade any of my grad students to pursue it. auden has a poem abt the space race, doesn't he?

Hermit Crabs Don't Cry to Politics and Deviations

From: Charles Bernstein

Subject: Hermit Crabs Don't Cry

On one of my frequent trips to the Folded Place inside the Ethernet's Thirteenth Passage, with the new translation into Idiophone of Moses Maimonides's Guide for the Perplexed in my left hand, I had occasion to jot down some rules of conduct (not so much community standards as uncommunity striations) into my Blake's Newton Feelpad (TM pending) (a pad is after all a kind of home, or used to be). The Feelpad, as many of you will know (and I use the word "you" carelessly), is able to convert inner feeling processes into linguistic signs. The protocols of the Blake's Newton Feelpad do not allow me to review the file before downloading directly onto your screens (and I also use the word "your" carelessly):

All of these proposed Listserve Rules will be enforced through a fully automated new version of the Youngman Listserve Program (Henney 33.95). As I am sure you will agree (and I use "you" loosely), Total Automation of rule enforcement is the only way to ensure fair and impartial Rule Maintenance:

1. Postings on Poetics@UBVM shall be neither in prose or verse. Rather, all postings shall conform to shifting character/line formats, announced periodically on the list. Initially, lines shall have at least 43 and no more than 51 characters; hyphenation is discouraged.
2. No messages shall be posted between :43 and :52 minutes after the hour.
3. All postings shall be made from "Dos"-type platforms; Apple users may post from "IBM"-type computers but the graphic orientation of Macs make these environments inappropriate for Poetics postings.
4. You have to sound 30 or show ID.
5. On the third Friday of every month, only short "chat" messages to friends on the list may be posted. For those without, or who no longer have, friends on the list, a message service will be available to provide names of friends as well as appropriate messages.

6. The Listowner will provide a name purging service to permit anonymous postings. Purged names will remain strictly confidential, although, at the Listowner's discretion, they may be sold, on condition of continued confidentiality, to benefit the outreach services at Poetics@UBVM provided by Whitewater Development Company.

7. Subscribers to Poetics@UBVM agree to end all "back channel" communication. All communication among subscribers shall be sent to the list as a whole: no individual e-mail or conventional mail may be exchanged, no face-to-face verbal communications will be permitted (nonverbal communication is in no way restricted by this rule). At first, this may be difficult for those who live in the same area. But, over time, the enormous advantages to community-building will become apparent.

8. In order to cut down on those repulsive smile icons that are used on Other Lists to indicate humorous intent (as we used to say in Method Acting class – DON'T INDICATE) [Remember the one about the actor who asked the director what his motivation was to walk across the set and light a cigarette, to which the director replied, "your motivation is, that if you don't, you'll be fired"?] – where was I? even when I write I lose track of where I am – oh yeah, in order to cut down on those smile icons, and for other reasons that should be obvious to all of you (I use the word "you" inadvisedly), all irony (including sarcasm, schtick, mocking, jokes, and comic innuendo) will be prohibited from the list. This is a particularly difficult rule to enforce automatically, but recent, unpublishable, research, indicates that there may be genetic markers of sarcasm and our team of crack(ed?) computer experts are working around the clock to find programs to detect this "irony gene" in linguistic expression.

>FINALLY<

For those who have asked that this listspace move toward reality rather than float in talky virtuality, the following rule implementation procedure will be adopted:

If there is significant sentiment on the list in favor of these rules, they will not be adopted; if, in contrast, there is strong opposition to these rules, they will become effective immediately.

In addition, to bring even more reality into the system, between three and five Listserve Rules will remain concealed from all subscribers AND about one percent of all messages will be randomly deleted before delivery.

From: Robert Creeley

Subject: Chicken Chat

Ted Joans has now come and gone, to fact of modest audience, a quiet midweek night in Buffalo at the end of the school year, etc. He's such an old time kind of poet, with a few books of his own to sell, satchel of personal belongings, arriving by bus from NYC at 7:25 AM, looking around very particularly. He proves a bridge over many troubled waters indeed, with stories of being recently in South Africa and countries there adjacent—moving as one can when there is no high exposure to deal with, sticking to the local and being handed on. He's moved as a poet reading and talking in Africa more than any other, of any circumstance—can tell you the particulars of language in various places, the lore of their locating habits, imaginations. And so on.

After his reading we were still sitting there, comfortably, talking, with the chicken wings etc etc—I was saying to Ken Sherwood how persuasively attractive this curious place (right here/the so-called net (well named)) had been these past few days. As if I'd been waiting like kid at edge of water to jump, and finally had—and found it terrific! An exfoliating "self" of weird kind that literally "echoed" back and back and back in apparent "objectivity" that nonetheless was just plain Bob/or words to that effect.

In the early 40s when still in college I had job as copy boy on the Boston Globe, and recall hysteria of trying to keep up with the sheets of paper rolling off the bank of teletype machines: "late breaking" bulletins with endless revisions, cancellations, etc etc. Now I got chance to play "sender".

But, as Ken said, it's a funny "place" and activity, as if one could really get lost "out there," be so "distributed" the focus, or locating response, were only endless reverberations of one's own initiating act. That is, it's instantly hard to hear anyone but one's self—and the moves, as in a poker game or checkers, become too simply (for me at least) redeterminations of my "position" (hardly "intellectual") as I want to keep "playing"—and why not.

Seamus Cooney was saying some time back, think of what it would have been like had you and Olson had email. Help... Yet it would have saved all those drab hours waiting for the mail—as I did at times, crouched back of brush some thirty feet from where the mail truck would pull up. In some obvious ways, writing letters back then was even more of a singular act, a proposal of self

simply, than what I am doing here right now– but on reflection it seems the same.

Carla Billitteri in last discussion of Olson seminar etc used sense of the "solipsistic fury" of his late work: "Wholly absorbed..."; "I live underneath the light of day..." Etc. I think of Wittgenstein's essay/ lecture on ethics, wherein he speaks of will to make just one word that can be autonomous–self creating. It seems the same "fury"–familiar to all who read, write, or think no doubt. "Was that a real poem or did you just make it up yourself..." Quien sabe, amigos.

From: Jed Rasula

Subject: Re: Olson's "fury"

Re: Olson's "fury" & Bob Creeley's humanizing of it as a generic condition of readers & writers grasping for an autonomous word.

I think of other senses, archaic, mythopoeic, in which Olson would have worked the material, pressed out its ulterior sense. "Fury" is not merely an emotional state, but the name for the Erinyes, spirits avenging family violence. Their inception is curious, as they arise from the ground in the drops of blood spattered by the castration of Uranus in that primal scene of patricide. Colloquially the furies were appealed to in cursing, and are thought of as even the personifications of curse. And Jean-Pierre Vernant has something interesting to add: "The Erinyes can claim the two extremes: What is 'pure' and 'natural' is also what is raw. They do not drink wine but they do eat men." (Myth & Tragedy in Ancient Greece, 158)

From: Robert Creeley

Subject: Fury

Carla's note of Olson's "solipsistic fury" gets misplaced here necessarily, just that I took it out of context, didn't mark its company in her thinking ("stone," "double"), nor in any respect suggest what the preoccupations in her discussion were. At some point I hope one can read what she's done for oneself—as I'm sure she hopes likewise. One's trying to get to the place (what I'd call the context) where Olson finds himself—as in the early note to Elaine Feinstein: "Orientate me." ("The light is in the east," etc etc.)

Anyhow, thinking of Jed Rasula's useful addition of the Furies (the English of the Latin of the Greek)—I like the fact that "fury" locates in "rage," and that certainly echoes: "rages, tears..." "And the thought of its thought is the rage/ of Ocean : apophanesthai..."

—Egocentrically it recalls my own (humanistic) "possession": "I rage./ I rage, I rage." The downside, like they say, of a state that is not simply (only) an emotion (as Jed usefully emphasizes)—but is a place one's come into, as "Come into the world."

This one,

that one,

the other one—

I keep thinking of "seizure," a sense I get insistently in Olson—that one acts in/from such state. Paradoxically it's the Greco/Roman that seems to have the problem with such "place," it's so "irrational"—thinking, in contrast, of the dervishes still very active in Turkey (if often reduced to a kind of "entertainment" (or so attached) akin to pueblo ritual dances in the southwestern U.S.).

But here it all goes again—that endless digression! "Get on board, etc etc." I wish there were some damn way to get out/get in "here" so as to find the literal company one knows is "there". Somehow the note in the bottle—charming though that be—is, for me, still the parallel. Which means at best I'm in there too. Show me the way to go home! I'm TIRED and I WANT TO GO TO

BED... (P.S. Just in Baltimore and they sure eat well –and no chicken wings in sight... Maryland Institute of Art (Joe Cardarelli) seems where it's at. Anyhow "my Baltimore" is same plus memories of Andrei Codrescu, David Franks, and impeccable Anselm Hollo. "Scrapple" on the menu. All the trees had leaves! Barry Alpert in good spirits. Julie Kalendak's going to Alaska. Onward!)

From: Michael Boughn

Subject: experiwhat?

Can someone out there explain how the concept of "experiment" relates to the practice of poetry? My own understanding of "experiment" is that it specifically has to do with forms of thinking and practice associated with the accumulation of scientific knowledge, that is to say, the truth and falsity of theories and hypotheses. One forms an hypothesis based on generalizing from certain isolated empirical "facts", and then proceeds to test the "truth" or "falsity" of the hypothesis by submitting it to experimentation, i.e. looking for exceptions to the general rule.

Whatever it is we do as poets, I simply can't conceive of any way in which the concept of "experimentation" can meaningfully describe it. ... Innovative, maybe, or exploratory, or even weird poetry, but never, never "experimental". I know I may sound a bit cranky, but since words are our lives, we ought to be careful with them, especially when discussing our own craft.

From: Ron Silliman

Subject: Motivation

What I like about Social Formalism is that it combines both the general thrust of the activity with the general thrust of the motivation for such activity, i.e., that these writings are/were motivated for explicitly social reasons, even where (as often enough was the case) the definition of the social reason would have been hard to get at beyond "general sense of dissatisfaction w/ the present condition of things"

What separates most of the writers in *In the American Tree*, for example, from poets now ages 25-30 doing superficially similar things on a page, is precisely that sense of motivation. Not that younger poets don't have motivation, but it's a different one, generally. And the fact that something like LangPo sits owl-like on the landscape is part of the problem any younger poet must thus face.

The impulse to write in the way that, say, Stephen Rodefer did 10 years ago, is not the same today. Even for Stephen.

I actually think that is why in the *O-blek* anthology we see such a "return to the lyric" as a mode. It represents precisely the draining of the "social" from that equation.

Which may be why, w/ the exception of Mark Mendel's appropriation of Jenny Holzer's sense of display for poetry, there are no literary devices in that collection that you cannot already find in *The New American Poetry*, *In the American Tree* or *The Art of Practice*.

"Experimental poetry" I think tries as a category to express the same combination of activity & motivation, but both terms in the equation seem too vague ultimately. And I do think that for many poets, esp. during the 1950s, the first term in that category carried with it some connotation of the "prestige of science" – Think of Bern Porter, or even Kostelanetz. Or Eli Mandel, who went from "Hot Afternoons Have Been in Montana" (one of the interesting attempts at the American long poem during the so-called modernist era which has not made it even into the most retro canon as yet) to true crackpot science "curing gays of homosexuality" on the right-wing homophobic circuit before he died. Zukofsky has that same sense of wearing the lab coat at the blackboard. The Doctor will see you now.

What has always struck me about the negativity we see with the word formalism has been those people who presume it to represent an impulse toward stasis—the new formalists are a positive expression of this, but it could be found in inverted ways in Tom Clark's attack on LangPo and elsewhere.

Every label expresses an agenda. Think of the terms for the apex of the M nexus: "Christian Language Poets" definitely throws them into some role as variant/tributary—definitely a subservient position. The New Mysticism says nothing of their practice as writers (which in turn is a slam on their writing). The Buffalo Problem may be cute, but in fact their work cannot be generalized to the larger Buffalo scene where, I'm told, they've largely disappeared ... But if every label expresses an agenda, the hidden nature of that agenda is what would make the 17th generation of The New York School an interesting intellectual problem as such.

There are real strategic advantages to having access to a term whose meaning has become as vague as that, almost a protective covering. So when I see a label, I ask what does it say of the activity & motivation of those are labeled? "Poets associated with United Artists" seems to deliberately skirt some of these issues, tucked right under the name of the magazine.

From: Steve Evans

Subject: Motives & Devices

Ron Silliman's recent posting on "motivation" raised some difficult questions about the current state of inter-generational relations within one sub-domain of oppositional poetry. I want to dwell on a few of the claims Ron made in his posting, claims that struck me as problematic and provocative in equal proportions. If possible, I'd like to rob of their "obviousness" certain assumptions that seem to have hardened along the seam where two generations, one established and one emerging, meet. Though I doubt the following remarks can achieve that goal, perhaps other people can find a way to move us towards it?

Ron makes three claims in the first five graphs of his posting, each of which pertains to the intersection of motivation/device/generation. I don't have a "copy" function available to me, so I will reproduce these claims schematically before noting what seems problematic about them to me.

Claim 1: "what separates most of the writers in In the American Tree, for example, from poets now ages 25-30 doing superficially similar things on a page, is precisely...motivation."

For the sake of economy, in the following I'm going to use the shorthand G1 to indicate "writers in In the American Tree," and G2 for "writers now ages 25-30" (some of whom appear in o-blek 12: Writing from the New Coast).

Ron identifies the "motivation" of G1 as "explicitly social...even where (as often enough was the case) the definition of social reason would have been hard to get at beyond 'general sense of dissatisfaction w/ the present condition of things.'" This segues into

Claim 2: the "return to the lyric" in o-blek 12 "represents precisely the draining of the 'social' from" the concerns of G2. Which in turn leads to

Claim 3: this "draining of the 'social'" explains "why, with [one exception], there are no literary devices in [the New Coast] that you cannot already find in The New American Poetry, In the American Tree or The Art of Practice."

Apropos Claim 1: I see plenty of evidence in both volumes of the New Coast to suggest that G2 meets the minimal definition of "social motivation" provided by Ron ("general dissatisfaction w/the present condition of things"). If anything, the failure of the New Left and the impasses of identity politics seem to have increased that dissatisfaction, while the fact that G1's claims for the social efficacy of its collective poetic project have only been partially borne out suggests the necessity of exploring alternate routes.

Apropos Claim 2: The ominous scenario in which the social is somehow "drained" away only makes sense if such devices as one finds in ITAT represent the exclusive means of criticizing existing social relations and evoking potentials for social transformation. Ron establishes a double bind for G2: continue to employ G1's devices (in which case you'll be labeled derivative and your motivation will be characterized as improper) or invent/adopt other devices (in which case you'll be accused of permitting the "social" to "drain" away). I've been seeing variants of this argument since the mid-80s, and I'd have thought it was clear by now that there is more than one way to compose/propose the social in poetry, and that the employment of devices associated with the lyric genre does not automatically entail the abandonment of an oppositional literary and social project.

Apropos Claim 3: Does it make sense to compare the New Coast, an emphatically "prospective" collection of 119 young writers, to such retrospective anthologies as the New American Poetry and ITAT? (I leave aside The Art of Practice, though the fact that 10 of the 45 writers presented there also appear in the NC makes the attempt to set them sharply at odds untenable). I think the question of what devices these young writers will develop in their careers is anything but settled at this point. The suggestion that G2 has "returned" to the lyric implies that the question has already been settled in favor of a modest conservatism: in which case it remains to be explained why no three poets in the New Coast could be inserted into the NAP or ITAT without substantially changing the texture of either preceding collection.

I think the summary judgment that G2 brings forward "no new devices" is a conveniently veiled way of discrediting work that mobilizes a host of "devices" and puts into play a range of "motivations" that haven't yet been codified (and, in response to the perceived "programmaticism" of G1, may not elect to use the strategies of codification favored by that previous generation).

There are other questions that could be posed here (why for instance the Apex of the M has been taken as the chief development requiring explanation in the

past year or so, despite the fact that its version of repressive resublimation hardly accounts for the only instance of "collective unity"—as Ron phrases it in an earlier post—to be seen in that time; cf. "Chain" for instance, also "out of" Buffalo). But I have already gone on too long....

From: Ron Silliman

Subject: G2

Steve Evans always has interesting and valuable points to make. I want to unpack a couple here.

- > Apropos Claim 2: The ominous scenario in which the social is some-
- > how "drained" away only makes sense if such devices as one finds in
- > ITAT represent the exclusive means of criticizing existing social
- > relations and evoking potentials for social transformation.

I didn't (don't) make any claim of exclusivity of devices for In the American Tree and the concept makes no sense to me. I could point to hundreds of alternative examples from my own generation alone that are equally social but well outside the positioned critique that separates out most of the Tree's poets from the broader (less differentiated) terrain.

- > Ron establishes a double bind for G2: continue to employ G1's devices
- > (in which case you'll be labeled derivative and your motivation will be
- > characterized as improper) or invent/adopt other devices (in which case
- > you'll be accused of permitting the "social" to "drain" away).

What other devices?

It is precisely the continuation of the same set of devices in increasingly modest forms that characterizes the broader poetics of G2, as Steve calls it in a curiously clinical abbreviation. It is that modesty, as such, that I was getting at as a "draining of the social"— and I accept the possibility that it may actually represent a much more complex ensemble of social phenomena, that may well include grave doubt over the possibilities of collective action (say), all of which would be well worth elaborating on at length

And I should note from the outset the obvious, that the choice of such forms need not limit any individual poet from achieving as much as anybody ever has.

It seems clear to me that some of the writers in O-blek 12 – Lee Ann Brown and Jessica Grim for example – have already established themselves as major poets. On anybody's terms.

>Apropos Claim 3: Does it make sense to compare the New Coast, an

>emphatically "prospective" collection of 119 young writers, to such

>retrospective anthologies as the New American Poetry and ITAT?

I for one don't buy the "prospective" nature of O-blek 12 as anything other than as a stance. And a troubling one. The average age of the poets in O-blek 12 may well be 5 years OLDER than the poets in the Allen anthology, for example. And the aggressive placement of the "spirit" section at the front of the "technique" (i.e. theory) volume shows an overall argumentative structure that is more aggressive even than the Tree. What "prospective" seems to mean here is a reluctance to acknowledge or own its own position. At least the Apex folks don't suffer from that....

From: Steve Evans

Subject: G-ology

First, my apologies for introducing such an absurd notation as "G2" into list usage. I only intended it as a tool for grasping what felt to me like the conventional/abstract nature of Ron's speculations on the work of emerging writers.

Having spent a significant portion of my fairly brief intellectual life trying to force discussions about the work Ron refers to as "Social Formalism" into a space not totally predecided by stereotype and phobic characterization, I get a little anxious when I think the whole labor of insisting on the specificity and value of a new body of work will have to be repeated (and to no less than the Social Formalists themselves). Ron & others: say it ain't so!

But on to specifics. Marjorie Perloff's remarks about the shifting tenor of political commitments among progressives in the U.S. make sense, but let's not forget that the "burning political concerns" of *In the American Tree* were/are by no means self-evident: to accept Bruce Andrews's "In Funnel" or David Melnick's *Poet* as doing political work, one has to have a sense of the political rather more elastic than most people on the left had in the 70s or for that matter have today. To abbreviate a much longer discussion: it takes a highly developed utopian imagination to get from linguistic to social activism; from the "tyranny of the signifier" (a phrase that is laughable today but which articulated aspirations for social change for some people in the 70s-80s) to anti-capitalist struggle.

What I don't understand is why this hard-won utopian intelligence (or say: set of reading practices) is not brought to bear on the New Coast. If you can read Rae Armantrout as "positioned critique" can't you do the same for Robert Kocik?

I suppose that at some point, Ron, names will have to be mentioned to go along with generalizations such as "the continuation of the same set of devices in increasingly modest forms...characterizes the broader poetics of G2." I'm honestly not sure what's at stake for you in such remarks.

On the question of "average ages" of NC and NAP, it seems clear to me that biological age doesn't equal "age" in terms of the poetic field.

To clarify one general point in closing: I am not under the impression that a collective re-definition of what poetry is and does has as yet been articulated by G2, which is perhaps all Ron means to be saying. Given the way literary fields work in capitalist social formations, the failure to achieve such a collective redefinition will lead to a lot of interesting poetry disappearing beneath the ready-made rubrics that persist from the last time such a struggle was won.

From: Ron Silliman

Subject: G-ology

...Steve Evans' intro to the Technique section of O-blek 12 seems to me the most heroic attempt to date to articulate a terrain for G2. I think that he's right in that intro about the motivating "hatred of identity" that runs through the work, although his reading of the phenomena in O-blek is more broad and generous than that espoused in Apex's "State of the Art" manifesto. I used those two pieces with my class at Naropa, which led to some lively, albeit inconclusive discussions. Certainly nobody has ever done a more aggressive job misreading and stereotyping a community than Apex' broad swipes at G1 (& esp. LangPo): "an avant-garde dominated in its practices by a poetics espousing the priority of 'language itself' over all other relations." (p. 5)

Is that not a classic instance of labeling theory taking the misnomer "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poet" just a wee bit literally? I've never once met a G1 who espoused that.

Or, later on the same page, "a participatory valorization of this disintegration...." Haven't both Gayatri Spivak & Bob Perelman completely answered that in response to Fred Jameson's only-slightly-more-in-depth reading of the poem "China"?

And, throughout "State of the Art," an entire series of presumptions concerning the social functions of innovation, as though everyone from M. Bertrand thru G1 were an Italian futurist celebrating the potentiality of the submachine gun. Talk about "phobic characterization"!!

I think what makes the Apex group stand out so much, especially at a distance (where, for example, it's easier to forget [or ignore] that Alan Gilbert, Kristin Prevallet and Lew Daly, the editors whom I've actually met, are all lovely, charming, intelligent people, as full of complexity and caution as one might want), is precisely the directness of their address, which shoots right through even the "post"iness of its convoluted syntax. While Steve wants me to "say it ain't so," the Apexers say openly that "a new understanding of our task as iconoclasts and not innovators will emerge." If I ignore for a moment how I feel at the lack of accuracy and generosity in their description of my cohorts in G1, that's still an interesting and difficult claim to make and I want to know more. What distinguishes them as a group phenomenon is their ambition—it's

the most "out there" manifesto we've had in ages—even if their "ambition is to have no ambition" (as I think the British punk band The Gang of Four once put it, back in the swampy G1 days of 1982).

Besides, Steve, Chick Gandil, who organized the Black Sox throw of the 1919 series (he was the first baseman), and thus gave rise to the very phrase you use, used to live on my very block here in Berkeley. He worked with my grandfather. That's at least as cosmic as discovering that I'm the reincarnation of one of Jackson Mac Low's past lives. (Or that Jack Spicer and my father died on the very same day in 1965.)

> But on to specifics. (This is Steve "talking") Marjorie Perloff's remarks
> about the shifting tenor of political commitments among progressives
> in the U.S. make sense, but let's not forget that the "burning political
> concerns" of *In the American Tree* were/are by no means self-evident: to
> accept Bruce Andrews's "In Funnel" or David Melnick's *Pcoet* as doing
> political work, one has to have a sense of the political rather more elas-
> tic than most people on the left had in the 70s or for that matter have
> today.

At the point that David wrote *Pcoet*, he was either about to (or just had) abandoned his idea of ever finishing his dissertation (the one chapter he wrote appeared in the *Maps* special issue on Zukofsky), and came out of the closet to his students at Berkeley with a vengeance, platform shoes and glitter in his beard. There was absolutely no way that any one confronting either him or that text in those days could not see the text's relation not just to the history of modernism but also to what was then known as "gender fuck" politics.

The argument for Bruce's work is not dissimilar. Tho his idea of gender fuck is a little different.

Besides, one of the major thrusts of one strain of G1 was to counter the various modes of vulgar left critical/aesthetic practice. Bruce Boone, Bob Gluck, Steve Benson, myself and Kathleen Fraser were all once in the same marxist study group, and we had some TERRIFIC arguments. In every sense of that word.

And every single one of the G1s who were politically active (not just through our poetry) dealt with these issues repeatedly.

>What I don't understand is why this hard-won utopian intelligence (or
> say: set of reading practices) is not brought to bear on the New Coast.

I disagree that this is what's goin' on. Here the claim in Apex about "iconoclasts and not innovators" rings much truer to my ear. What I want to know is what the social content of that might be.

>If you can read Rae Armantrout as "positioned critique" can't you do
> the same for Robert Kocik?

Yes, absolutely. I'm interested in examining the nature of each position. I'm not especially making the argument for my g-g-g-generation.

> I suppose that at some point, Ron, names will have to be mentioned to
> go along with generalizations

Oh, I still do believe in Lenin's idea that the move toward "abstraction" is toward the truer layer of the concrete.

> I'm honestly not sure what's at stake for you in such remarks.

I thought (still do) that if I prod a little, I'd get some interesting feedback from poet(s) in G2 (maybe even G3) who would further articulate the landscape, so that the "prospective" (i.e. inchoate) nature posed by O-b 12 might give greater rise to a new shared vision of a broader terrain. Frankly, I'd like to see less reactive criticism and more manifestos a la Apex (and from a broad range of positions). I find it interesting (very ambiguous word here, and deliberately so) that the most detailed response has come from somebody who positions himself as a critic and not as a poet, as such.

> On the question of "average ages" of NC and NAP, it seems clear to me
> that biological age doesn't equal "age" in terms of the poetic field.

Huh?

Actually, the question of age is a complex one all on its own. One of the real values of The Art of Practice is its inclusion of a number of poets generationally part of G1 who did not begin publishing until later than most of those in Tree. (I'm reminded, say, how late both Jackson Mac Low and Hannah Weiner were to publish regularly. When Jackson was my age, 48, he had exactly 6 books in print.)

But I do think that there's a generational dynamic (different for each G) that focuses when poets are under still well under 35, and that to wait longer as a generation to begin to stake out a space is itself a notable step, so that the hesitancy implicit there must itself be looked at as part of the process (Think of Olson's age in comparison to Creeley, Blackburn et al, or of Burroughs to Ginsberg & Kerouac, or of Williams to the Objectivists.)

>To clarify one general point in closing: I am not under the impression

> that a collective re-definition of what poetry is and does has as yet been

> articulated by G2

Yep, except for Pam, Lew, Kristin & Alan have at least made one stab.

>Given the way literary fields work in capitalist social formations, the

> failure to achieve such a collective redefinition will lead to a lot of

> interesting poetry disappearing

Absolutely! Several G1ers have noted in recent years how much the O-blek 12 formation of G2 reminds them of the younger writers who found themselves active around certain modes of the NAP in the mid- to late-60s. David Schaff, Bill Deemer, Harold Dull, d alexander, Lowell Levant, Ed Van Aelstyn, John Gorham, Gail Dusenbery, Stan Persky, Seymour Faust, George Stanley, William Anderson, Wilbur Wood, etc etc etc. But failing to distinguish their terms from NAP1, NAP2 proved unable, unwilling to set up the institutions that might have insured their own communities' perpetuation into the future.

I am amazed and appalled that neither the Messerli nor the Hoover anthologies include the work of Lew Welch. In the 1960s, he would have come into almost any listing of the 24 or so most influential NAPpers. Such is history. You have to write it yourself.

From: Juliana Spahr

Subject: Re: G2

As to the Evans-Silliman exchange:

I appreciated both posts. But Steve's I found especially useful for clarifying a lot of the problems that I had with Silliman's original post. What I find most frightening about Silliman's arguments is his reduction of everything in Buffalo or even elsewhere in the nation to a sort of spiritualism (it is the only grouping that he acknowledges as really having any seriousness) that finally isn't representative of the larger picture.

For starters, as Jena made clear, neither of the editors of Chain are on the board of Apex of the M. Chain in fact is a journal that in many ways pursues an opposite agenda as that of Apex—it is anti-editorial, anti-grouping. The use of the device of the chain letter in the first volume was explicitly intended to expand community definitions beyond editorial privilege (Jena Osman and I wrote about the success and failure of this project in our "Editors' Notes"). Also neither of the editors of the Technique volume are on the board of Apex of the M.

But while this is probably just a confusion on Silliman's part, it also seems in some ways indicative of his blindness to anything going on in what seems to be called G2 poetry beyond spirit. Beginning the Technique volume with the Spirit section was something that went counter to my editorial wishes and knowledge (I wanted to open with the broader "word and world" section), but also I think should not be read as "aggressive." Peter argues that when he sent this volume off to the printers with the spirit section first, it was to try to offer some connection with the Presentation volume—both begin with Abbot and end Ziolkowski. I am willing to chalk it up to alphabetical accident.

But also I don't think that any more than the twenty-one poets in the spirit section have much to do with spirit (and come on, even of these twenty-one, beyond a statement of an idea of poetics as being transformative, it is hard to see these poets as a unified group—Mieka And, Lisa Jarnot are hardly spiritualist poets that would meet the rigors of definition proposed in Apex—this confusion or expansion of the categories in this collection was an editorial intention).

Finally, to see the anthology as spiritualist is to do a great and serious disservice to around one hundred other poets. Just as to say that the anthology

indulges in "increasingly modest forms" is to do a great disservice to a whole slew of writers (who are these people, Ron? Who is "returning to the lyric? What are their numbers in this volume? Who is draining the social? What is the social and why is the lyric not social?—these are all innocent questions on my part, I need more specifics to actually begin to discuss this topic which is one that seems very urgent to me). It is, to just list some names at random, unfair to Lee Ann Brown's and Karen Kelley's attention to sexuality, unfair to Kevin Magee's mix of formalism, class struggle, and history, unfair to Myung Mi Kim's attention to relation, unfair to Susan Gevirtz's complicated feminism and attention to subjectivity, unfair to C.S. Giscombe's attention to identity. It is also I think unfair to the overt political intention in the anthology to include as many women as men (something that other anthologies of alternative poetry don't even come close to attempting and something that never seems to get mentioned in any complaint about this collection). Further, I am no longer sure any more, although I would have been a year ago, that a return to the lyric is a draining of the social. For starters, it is difficult to separate the social from any form. Susan Stewart's recent work on the lyric has done a lot of change the way I think of this form.

Also, I don't see the anthology has having a "reluctance to acknowledge or own its own position." It seems rather that there is a complication in the anthology of what it means to have a position (an identity, a school, a gender). Steve Evans's introductory piece is good on this. If there is anything that sits owl-like overlooking a younger generation it isn't language poetry anymore than it is the New York school—it is rather attempts at categorization, at bunker mentality. Much of the work of what might be called G2 reacts against this and in very interesting and innovative ways (Apex is an obvious exception to this in their editorial return to a concept of poetic discourse as war). Perhaps the reason such a collection seems such a strange beast to Silliman is that it is so different than the rigorous, mathematical model of ITAT. It is a collection of younger poets— all of whose writing will change dramatically in the next years. I prefer to think of the anthology as more of a phonebook than even an anthology (these complaints about the authority of this anthology that are happening in Joel's post and in the discussion of anthologies at the beginning of the year are very alien to me—what authority? the whole thing was thrown together and knows it). The numbers will change, people will move, but it is an attempt at a demographic for the year. It claims no completeness. It doesn't tell you not to read the books of the authors included. At best, it is a reference tool. At its worst, it is difficult to read because it includes so many writers.

All of this has put me in the uncomfortable position of defending something that I have worked on. But while I acknowledge a lot of omissions and other problems with the anthology, I also believe that a lot of the work in it is important. I stand behind this work by other people because it has meant something to me. I don't find this work a repetition of language poetry nor does it seem to me upsetting that there are "no literary devices in that collection that you cannot already find in *The New American Poetry*, *In the American Tree*, or *The Art of Practice*" anymore than it upsets me that there are no devices in these anthologies that one cannot find in as inclusive a project as *America: A Prophecy* or maybe even the Norton. It is emphasis and idea and use of device here that is important. Not device itself.

I hope this makes sense. I would enjoy complaints and clarifications.

From: Tony Green

Subject: calling G1G2...this is mission control

Isn't "the poem", lock schlock and barrel, constituted by a writer who has continuing relations with the body politic, like it or not – thrown-ness as in Jim Morrison (rr or r) & Charles Bernstein have liked to say – following Heidegger, I guess. Oh yes aesthetics happens somewhere else then where, old bean, huh? Aesthetics is a blind for social and money interests mainly.

Confucius never found anyone who was disinterested – & that makes questions for a whole tradition of separations and purifications in the name of art (i.e. Milord's fetishized pictures and objets d'art, later property of boards of trustees of museums, or MS of Vergil, as sandwiched in plastic sheeting in Vatican to be literary. Poet's letters, Palgrave and subsequent anthologies in the college market).

Jean Calais's translations of Villon are all in vain...Everyone wants to be a big artist these days. There must be more in poetry than anyone has thought. Could it be that there is a real power in it/always ideologists want to bring it under their control, as instrument. Like music, it keeps on escaping ideological control clutches, saying more than it means to, or less. Let's hope there is a real poet among the new writers, or even two. Surely "G1" or any G at all including G-6 (dead poets of circa Mallarme's time will welcome them, by opening new readings to us, readings we had missed, but which may be what we have always really longed for. Belonging to no G in the U.S. (wrong age) but listening as a reader/user to several U.S. G's with pleasure, excitement, appropriative glee, there is no reason to choose among generations, only to pick out the plums. This you learn in "art history", who says there's progress between generations, so that no one can consider themselves righteous who can make use of "early" artworks? Does the saying of a poem work like a charm as entry to a space of thoughts and language issues and issues of living and the politics of living or not? No one can quite tell what will prove to be useful and sometimes it happens that a misprint retained does the trick. L= was marvelous because it accepted that conscious control of the way words got into the poem could be consonant with disorders that seemed to be the preserve of chance procedures or of lyrical speaking with tongues.

It did not only "displace" "personal poetries" (Downtown poetries various, variously remaining in some degree acceptable or with affinities) but also the

hopes for the upsurge of deep image to recreate the body and the body's politics. I look to see with interest which models from the recent G's various will reappear as the mashed potatoes for the younger poets. I could see aspects of beat poetry being valuable as well as the "spiritual" poetries of say Robert Kelly or George Quasha....

...This medium is great for filling in times like sitting in office waiting for next lot of exam papers to come in. Hello. American poets, it's half-past four on an early summer afternoon, -- here is your wake up call.

"The difference is spreading."

From: Ron Silliman

Subject: Flaming

I've found virtually every response to my last post really valuable and useful. Especially Juliana's.

But I don't want this to be reduced to a "generational debate" since I don't see "winners" or "losers" but rather think I (personally) have a lot to gain from getting the sorts of insights that seem right now to be just popping out the various posts. Road maps to the writing are especially valuable.

Besides, if this is going to be Oedipal, I know which role that puts me in, thank you...

Some thoughts here on a few of Mark Wallace's comments.

- > 1) It is a standard hegemonic (not to mention racist and imperialist)
- > move to take one piece of writing by some particular "group" (as it is
- > defined from outside) as the example of what is wrong with that
- > "group" as a whole, and then dismissing that "group" on the basis
- > of that one piece of writing.

Yo, Mark. I'm not saying there's anything "wrong" with the Apex cluster and am trying to read them, not dismiss them.

One of many valuable lessons I learned from Jerry Rothenberg about 25 years ago was that it's very hard for any writer to read the work of people 20 years or more younger than him or herself. Writers of the NAP generation tended to cluster w/ regards to my own G1 into the following patterns:

- 1) Couldn't read it, didn't try
- 2) Wasn't what they expected, so dismissed it outright, sometimes w/ great hostility

3) Tried to be generous, but didn't really get it

(this was/is almost a majoritarian reaction)

4) Read it with interest, insight and made valuable responses to it

W/ regards to G2, G3...Gn, I'd like personally to aim for #4.

And would appreciate any help I can get.

>It is even hegemonic, racist, and imperialist to refer to them as a >"group."

What is the point of writing a collective "state of the art" if people don't take it seriously as collective action? I'm not the one grouping them together. I will admit that to use a governmental/institutional frame such as a "state of the art" address does put one into some heavy metaphoric territory. They're the ones who announced that they were the government, no?

Let's avoid flame wars of hyperbole and character assassination if possible. It makes it harder to read the work.

> 2) "Make it new" was hardly a dictum put forth by someone interested

> in social liberation. Indeed, "make it new" is at least as effective as a

> capitalist slogan as it is as a call to radical change. And whatever the

> social effectiveness of the proponents of "make it new" in poetry (I

> think it's unclear, but worth discussing) their success has been

> undeniable in terms of their marketing of that concept and their

> promotion of poetry that fits the concept.

Actually, Pound was interested in social liberation. But he had a profoundly fucked up idea of what that might mean. The other point about making it new and the promotion of a poetry that fits the concept is one that the New Formalists have already made. Interesting to see it here.

> 4) To see the "lyric" as somehow a force of social conservatism is simply

> HISTORICALLY UNVERIFIABLE. The lyric form, like the use of

- > parataxis, collage, sonnets, whatever, is a possibility that can be made
- > use of, or discarded, in a variety of historical situations.

I think that a social examination of the lyric is a great project to think about working on. I've even contemplated the idea of a book length study. Especially since the definition of lyric changes I think (part. in the late 19th century) as its differentiation from dramatic & narrative modes dissolves in poetry due to the arrival of other more powerful dramatic/narrative media, the novel, cinema, etc. Pound's tripartite logopoeia, phanopoeia, melopoeia are an attempt I think to rescue that earlier distinction, essentially dividing lyric into all three houses of the poem. But the underlying question becomes, what is the social meaning of the lyric? In O-blek 12, as I read it, it seems a return to the personal and local, which in turn can mean a lot of things. I'd like to figure out just what those are.

In general, I think that all forms are amoral and can be used from any political/social position depending on the context.

- > 5) I don't think it's at all clear whether younger writers are "returning
- > to the lyric." But if writers are using lyric forms, the question to ask is
- > NOT "what's wrong with those writers?" but rather "what is it about
- > the contemporary social environment that makes the lyric seem useful
- > to some writers" or "what is it about the lyric that makes it seem useful
- > to some writers in this social environment."

EXACTLY!!

- > 7) In fact, my objection to Lew Daly's introduction to Apex of the M
- > is... that it repeats the same Oedipal MALE model of thinking your
- > poetry has value only if you can "overthrow the enemy." My problem
- > with his introduction is ... that IT LOOKS TOO MUCH LIKE THOSE
- > MANIFESTOS.

It wasn't Lew who signed it. According to Alan & Kristin, they all worked on it together, to the point that even some sentences were collaboratively written.

> 8) But the idea that Lew's work, however interesting or not, is a state-

> ment of MY poetics, or that of Steve Evans or Jena Osman or whoever,

Nobody ever said it was. Or Jena's or Juliana's or Joel's or most anybody else in O-blek 12 except for the very particular few who actively commit themselves to some version of its argument. So people like Will Alexander and Elizabeth Robinson stand in an interesting relation to it, not a part of that declaration but obviously very sympathetic to its conception of a spiritual poetics. Not clear at all how they would stand w/ regards to State of the Art's rather bellicose stance toward the past.

I have found people in O-blek 12 who themselves felt that putting the spirit section first in Technique "yolked" them into its general thrust and felt very much ripped off by that, precisely because they did not buy into the underlying argument and felt that putting it first created a sense of that. I've heard that from at least 5 contributors.

The value of State of the Art is that it makes explicit what O-blek 12's editing structure seems to imply. Very hard to read it as an accident of the alphabet.

From: Larry Price

Subject: Anachronism

... I'd like to offer a reading of "anachronism." Actually, my take would be that the ANACHRONE is about as likely as the ANAMORPH (not at all). But I take my clue by returning to the morph, margin/center. Although I'll avoid the hedge implicit in the term "problematic," the fact is that in 9 out of 10 times the term "center" is used, it probably doesn't exist. However, this only means that the "margin" "center" differentially signifies must have a far more complex relation to group formation than a simple geometric model would allow. And it's that fact of the possibility of brownian motion in there that I think needs to be addressed, as well as the converse aggregate narratives (only one among them being that of the center) that work as the ideological.

In fact with regard to time (baldly) or history (pathetically) there seems every bit as much tendency to "vibrate." However, there is also another morph, one which places language (in any generation) explicitly within the problem. That is, I've thought a great deal about Ed Foster's introduction of Whitman into the discussion of, amongst so much else, parts and wholes, as he wrote, "discrete letters." It occurs that the issue revolves around the diacritical character of the medium. That and the fact that in the body (or at least in the experience of it) there is a zone (or at least the illusion of one) that does NOT experience the problem of open/closed form, a zone for which experience is analogical. Although the base activity may be digital (this is, of course, borne out by cases of neural dysfunction: those whose neural bridges cannot be closed (one form of schizophrenia) vs. those whose neural bridges cannot be opened (causing severe depression)), the curious twist comes because of the rheostat phenomenon in most of the experiences in the total sensorium; that is, Emotion A is not premeasured in its track from 1 to 10, but seems to traverse a continuum. It may be the simple complication by other emotions, thoughts, sheer digs from the body/far-flung reaches of the sensorium. Who knows? That fact is that it has implications concerning language, which, of course, is diacritical throughout. I'll set aside the opposition speech/language and say the divide seems to come between the diacritical system of language and the bodily generation and/or experience of and/or within that diacritical system. The collision between (or chafing within) the digital necessity of a system and the body's analogical (fact of or) yearning for integration within itself and/or other. Which is how I then read Ed's use of Whitman vis-a-vis phonemics and syntax.

However, I would resist the equivalence Ed asserts between Stein and Whitman. Stein, it seems to me, pursued something of the opposite, something like the "truth of language," leading eventually, I think, to Creeley's (approximately) "I follow the words."

In any case, my point is that those two terms help to establish the perpetual sense of displacement (chronic OR morphic) that any writer "experiences."

From: Ron Silliman

Subject: Exile on Main Street

Steve is quite right about the reiteration of recuperation from one generation to the next. Rae Armantrout once noted that every few years she gets to show another set of students that they did not invent the attitude captured in the Rolling Stones' album "Let It Bleed" (the Stones didn't invent it either).

About 10 years ago, McDonald's had a campaign to promote its emerging breakfast menu (the idea of fast food breakfasts being one of the great market expansions of the past 15 years) that used the tag line of

DAWN GOOD FOOD

which, when I first saw it, felt entirely inspired by the writing of Bob Grenier's Sentences (just turn the W upside down), much in the same way that display ads in the 20th Century learned much from the use of the line break of WCW. Look at any newspaper circa 1910 and you will see the difference.

Grenier's distance from critical writing since founding This magazine a quarter century ago has always seemed to me an attempt to avoid the exact kind of co-optation that that McDonalds ad already has accomplished for him.

Obviously it would be nice to think that you and I are not implicated in the atrocities that occur in Bosnia or Rwanda or East Timor. But we are. We are directly and personally responsible. Each one of us.

That has always seemed to me to be the most immediate lesson of the war in Indochina.

The problem of dropping out (or any other metaphor of purist disdain for the establishment's use of one's soul) is that there is no Out. Out is simply a safe place that In has set aside to keep Out from making too much unpleasant noise.

Ultimately, the problem of opposition is not one of how to avoid becoming a commercial. You can't. Trying to do so just wastes time. The question rather seems to be one of positioning what happens when/as you do. Here the most tragic situations have been those who apparently thought it would somehow "solve" something. Brautigan for example.

I find it intriguing, to say the least, to see where Kit Robinson, Tom Mandel & James Sherry, three of the poets of my own G1-hood who I take to be among its most serious political thinkers (Sherry's *Our Nuclear Heritage* is the most completely & directly political work any of us have accomplished, it seems, a project at once both of ambition and courage) have chosen to work. Certainly not the academy. None disdains the human drama of the marketplace. Sherry currently is employed by Phillip Morris, which ranks somewhat ahead of the Khmer Rouge in total number of fatalities caused over the past 40 years.

I've worked on ads that have appeared in the Wall Street Journal, NY Times, Forbes, Fortune and other bastions of liberal thought. And I work for a company whose clients include both houses of congress, and the departments of defense and justice. Not to mention most of the corporations one might hold an attitude about. Including Phillip Morris.

I think that what I (or James or Tom or Kit or anyone) gains far more from exposure to that world than from abstinence. This is where I think the alternative approach has many of the same problems I associate with anarchism, which is another mode of the Out position. (Anarchy is not a political system but rather a transitional state...and always one on the way to feudalism it would seem.)

I think that we are entering a very dark time politically. And a very dangerous one. Experimentation would at best be a distraction. But who wants to be distracted in a burning building?

From: Paul Hoover

Subject: politics

Glad to see Ron's post re: Exile on Main Street. There certainly is no "out" and you don't have to be Marxist to see it. I had the pleasure to hear a lecture by Amiri Baraka yesterday: "So that since the U.S. is an imperialist country, with a monopoly capitalist economic base, the institutions raised on that base, as well as the philosophies expressed within them, are in the main expressions of imperialism." The only thing that matters is the economic base, and without the moderating influence of a competing morality such as the church or local community, our economic life is focused on selfishness. It is in the interest of consumerism, therefore, to destroy traditional values including religious and/or ethnic values ("peasant traditions" in WCW's "For Elsie"). Relativism and indeterminacy (and alas the well-meaning avant-garde) apparently collaborate in this.

Like Lew Daly (apparently), I was raised in a German pietist tradition that argued against material possession and chose separation from the world. This separation worked primarily on the symbolic level, since inevitably one must trade with "Das English" as the early Brethren & Amish called them. My interest in poetry derives from that background. Good works, if not transcendence, through writing. But the desire for fame and office brings dominance back in, and we become little imperialists. Baraka was wonderful to hear and full of satiric fire. But the talk was given in an institutional setting (my working-class arts college in Chicago) on a grant from the Lilly Foundation and his fee for the day was \$5,000. We all work out of an economic base that extends to poetic value. Inevitably, one poet is perceived to be "worth more" than another. Susan Howe and Nathaniel Mackey rise; someone else falls. We are currency, and what else is new?

It is possible to interpret multiculturalism as further ghettoization funded by the MacArthur and other foundations; it is masked, however, as "community building." Their goal is to bring enough marginal people into the high-tech middle class that revolution will not seem necessary. Meanwhile, as Andrei Codrescu wrote in a recent essay, the real revolution, the triumph of global capitalism, continues apace.

The American peasant, Williams saw in horror, has no traditions. Except perhaps his/her "television heritage."

The great ideological disaster of the last 25 years has been separatism. But how are potentially conflicting peasant traditions to live together? By cruising the same mall or watching an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie? Yes.

There will be two future cultures: those who primarily watch TV and those who primarily work in front of a computer screen. Everything will be mediated by light. For high art, one goes out to a "film."

Last night on TV (I dropped my cable and really miss it), I saw a story about an orthodox rabbi from California who likes to surf: good eye candy but under it a very cheap laugh. TV despises dignity, and consumerism hates seriousness. Peasant traditions still have some dignity left. We observe this dignity on PBS sponsored by some foundation. We are relieved and a little surprised that blood sacrifice of llamas still occurs in Bolivia. Disturbed by the violence, we turn to a sitcom.

We feel responsible for Bosnia because we imagine that we might turn our military dominance toward good works. But we are not at all in the post-colonial age. The control is still there, just not the troops. Nothing happens in Bosnia because powerful interests are a lot more committed to GATT, NAFTA, and consolidating global capitalism. They will deal with Bosnia only when it threatens trade, as we saw in the Gulf War.

From: Aldon L. Nielsen

Subject: latter day lateness

The term "late capitalism" is no more dependent upon the end of capitalism being already in sight than the term "late evening" is dependent upon evening's in fact being over. It does, no doubt, indicate some form of faith on the speaker's part that this will not turn out to have been "middle capitalism" after all. It is a form of wishful thinking, no doubt, but does not require proof that capitalism has ended or will next week.

I am still unsure how the general understanding that poststructuralist theories are "relativist" came about. To claim that value is produced by social activities, not inherent as a property in an object as such, or to argue that there is no transcendent a priori realm of truth by which human utterances may be measured, is not necessarily to assume what is popularly known as an absolute relativism. This is really more an argument about what truth and value are than a claim that it's all relative. In *Limited Inc*, Derrida, sounding a bit exasperated, remarks that "from the point of view of semantics, but also of ethics and politics, 'deconstruction' should never lead either to relativism or to any sort of indeterminism." Derrida, and I only use him as an example because he is so often blamed for having loosed this relativism upon criticism, argues not against the value of truth; instead he reinscribes it in "larger, more stratified contexts." He does not say, anywhere that I can find in his writings, that there is no reality, no referent, but that one cannot refer to this "real" except in an interpretive experience. The antiessentialist position is generally easily confirmed by the existence of items taken by speakers of the language to belong to the same category that do not, at the same time, seem to share that "essential" characteristic. Thus, to use one immediate example, if Clarence Thomas is not "really" a black person, then the color of a person's skin must not be an essential trait of social blackness; and if he is really a black person, then many of the cultural traits taken by people too numerous to mention as being "essential" to blackness must not be essential after all.

Admittedly a bad example – but it was Genet who once asked "what color is a black man?" and he hadn't been reading Said, Fish, or Foucault on that day either –

From: Don Byrd

Subject: Experiments

Dear Charles—

I suppose you in part posted the list of experiments as an homage to Bernadette, and of course I wish her well.... And it is also a tribute to Tzara, Cage, and Mac Low, all of whom I would likewise honor.

Although, as you know, I sometimes—perhaps often—do not agree with you, I take your work very seriously. I find most of your moves in relation to the art generative—decisively so. And I have attempted to understand why you introduce these "experiments" in the context of your of your proposal of poetry as experimentation.

The use of that kind of experiment, when it was of use, was to rend the placid, rational surface of smug and placid rationalism. There was a powerful, even controlling assurance, that the world made sense. One half of Modernism was commitment to the revelation of precisely that sense— Yeats, Pound, Joyce, Shoenberg, Anglo-American philosophy from Russell and Wittgenstein to Quine and the Cognitive Scientists. It is sadly reduced but the drivel that comes from most Creative Writing programs to this day still basks in that now grim assurance that because I saw a blue jay on a maple branch take a shit, it must have some true and important connection to my thought of mortality.

The irruption of the irrational and its disruption of that smug sense of the world—whether from the Dadaist/surrealist algorithms of non-sense or from the failure to make it cohere by the like of Pound—was immensely satisfying and, of course, immensely productive.

The mode of production that had proven so successful in art was adapted in the 1950's also to commercial production. The rational machine of the capitalist economy began exploiting its own material unconscious, thus, fueling unparalleled economic growth. The surface of the earth was increasingly covered with the chaotic residue of riotous production: the production of art, the production of consumer goods, the production of by-products that polluted the environment, the production of what Smithson called "the slurbs"—"a circular gulf between city and country—a place where buildings seem to sink away from one's visionP buildings fall back into sprawling babels or limbos.

Every site glides away toward absence. An immense negative entity of formlessness displaces the center which is the city and the swamps."

For the generation of artists born of the World War II– "born dead," Smithson says of them, everything they'd learned was wrong. The techniques of the artists who had interested them in art in the first place, whom they had admired and thought to imitate, turned out to be inappropriate to this new condition. Dadaism lives: it is taught at in the Harvard M.B.A. program. Surrealism lives: it is taught to computer programmers at M.I.T. (some might say, mathematics has proven so strange, that it is taught even in the math department). Our architects, our lawyers are modernist purveyors of chaos (to say nothing, of course, of the faceless committees which generate what we call the media). After a certain point, chaos no longer needed the help of art. To recall wild nature in tranquillity, to practice nihilistic techniques of art and thought, to do automatic writing, or to create chance generated art is a pointless gesture. The techniques that delivered fresh air in 1810 or 1910 contributed (though contributed insignificantly) by 1970 to a proliferation of incomprehensible energy. The Dadaists never managed to exhibit the degree of chaos that Smithson records in his snap shots of Passaic, New Jersey.

It seems to me that these experiments at this late date call us back to means that are as exhausted as the means of a poetry that still attempts to make "ordinary" sense of a world where one watch a blue jay crap and thinks of mortality or Aunt Minnie.

If we are going to experiment, let us experiment with all seriousness. Stephen Hawking concludes *A Brief History of Time* with these words:

"... if we do discover a complete theory, it should be understandable in broad outline by everyone, not just a few scientists. Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we would know the mind of God."

To be sure, there is something very slippery in Hawking and those who make similar arguments (this guy Frank J. Tippet who has a very popular reading of physics right now is a real hoot) in that they confuse their representations for the world (as many writers make the opposite mistake). But I cannot help but notice the disparity between Hawking's hoped for result and the hoped for results in doing cut-ups of *Being and Time* and *The National Enquirer*.

It seems to me that if poetry is going to be taken seriously, it is going to have to ask more of itself. I would suggest that we take Parmenides, Lucretius, and Blake—Blake the thinker— as our models. It is going to be tough to teach the Workshop to do that, and we do not have much time, but we have time for nothing less. If no one writes a poem for fifty years that is okay. There was plenty of pass-times.

I do not mean that we can write like Parmenides, Lucretius, and Blake, but we might undertake the task of producing a world that offer the commodious possibilities for knowledge that theirs do.

The notion of avant-gardism and avant-garde experimentalism are profoundly progressivist. Even as the avant-guardists explored the most primitive recesses of culture and mythology, or the depths of dream and intoxication, systematic or random disorganization, the orientation was toward an expansion of consciousness into the unknown. The avant-gardists were the imperialists of the spirit, brothers and sisters to the colonists. The parallels between Walt Whitman's adventures into the soul and the United States adventures on its passage to India cannot be dismissed. Just as the modernists traveled along with the colonizing anthropologists. It is not for us now a matter of judgment. The time is long passed, and we can say only that that something, which had been lurking in human possibilities, hidden, made itself powerfully manifest: it was beautiful, unjust, vicious, and inevitable, and now complete. One cannot imagine the usefulness of such a concept in a world devoted to sustainable uses of resources.

The best assessments of the ecological damage are produced by different models and do not give consistent results. It would seem that after this extended period of cultural sacrifice for the sake of developing representational techniques that are accurate and complete it should be possible to model the world environment with considerable accuracy. The various representations, however, give a remarkable range of results, and we do not have a science for determining which representation is the best. We have theories and theories of theories, but in this most significant of matters, where the stakes are all or nothing, we do not know any thing for certain. It is generally clear, however, that the present industrial- environmental practices cannot be continued indefinitely without causing irreversible damage to the world ecosystem. In 1990, the well respected World Watch Foundation estimated that present trends would cause irreparable damage in forty years. Even if we have five times that long we are already in the crisis.

Certain aspects of desire were regimented (often at great personal cost) in the service of an organization devoted to greed. Communism proposes a greater justice in dividing up the booty, but it too is profoundly progressivist. What was repressed and is still effectively repressed is in fact obvious: the finitude of the earth.

For a very long time in the West we tried to base knowledge on the notion of infinitude. The critique of that notion has left art almost totally befuddled and trivial.

Let us begin with the finitude of the earth. This seems fairly secure knowledge, the grounds for a new epos. Over a century ago, John Ruskin wrote:

"The real science of political economy, which has yet to be distinguished from the bastard science, as medicine from witchcraft, and astronomy from astrology, is that which teaches nations to desire and labor for the things that lead to life, and which teaches them to scorn and destroy the things that lead to destruction."

How, Charles, do we get it all out of the poetry workshops?

From: Tom Mandel

Subject: notes on professions, academic etc.

It has taken me a couple of hours to read (at least partly) the extraordinary number of contributions to this list which have arrived in cyberlitterland over the last couple of days. My survival, i.e. time enough to pay the bills and make money enough to do so, depends on you cutting it out.

1. For 5 years during WWII neither the English nor any other allied power laid an intentional single bomb across the railroad tracks that led how many thousands of jews gypsies gay people per day? to doom. Does this make them thugs?

2. I was a grad student for 6 years, have taught in 3 universities, have worked for large corporations, as well as quasi-gov'tal organizations, and have written and lived poetry off and on all my life. Without question, and by metaphorical orders of magnitude, the most serializing, cutthroat, thoughtless and non-oppositional (i.e. slavish) environment I ever lived in was the academy. Lagging far behind is the world of poetry, although as poets move into the academy some of them unveil an extraordinary capacity to take on that local color (and others, on the other hand, retain the exceptional generosity of nature and act that will make you know whom I mean not to be commenting on). There is a strong sense of comradeship among poets somehow, at least I have always noted it, which mediates if not moderates the lust for... any response honor position the opportunity to make a living by your wit of words, whatever. This comradeship I think it is which allows a poet like Henry Taylor to write so meaningfully about Jackson Mac Low, and which allows me to enjoy getting to know HT despite the zero in common of our work. Much more open, all the same, much more egalitarian, much more permissive of range has been the world of commerce. I remember how shocking, and somehow wrong, I found that fact.

3. The above is what James Sherry might call a "theory based on memory... not analysis" (that's a paraphrase rather than a quote, but close I think). All theories are of memory (a term which we need not trivialize) and on the other hand, analysis (despite the brilliant series of posts by James which had me gasping with pleasure to keep up with) is a meaningless term, an honorific in any case, and a metaphor (understand by dividing : divide and conquer, really) of little application. Recursive systems (i.e. memory-based and developmental in

whatever chaotic way) offer the ability to accumulate insight at some social level; they are what can get us beyond M. Thatcher's "no society, just individuals" position.

4. What I say in point 3 is intended to make you understand that what I say in point 2 is true.

5. I've been fired from positions both academic and in commerce, in both cases (repeatedly, by the way) for the same reason, for having an idea. In commerce, at least usually, it was because the idea didn't work. In the academy? Just for having an idea.

6. When I quoted Hugh of St. Victor on exile, it was not so that you (dear reader) should have your consciousness perfected by the right position, but that you might take in and "experimentally" share a response. Again, the goal is to accumulate and distribute some largest possible sense of human response. Nothing is more foolish than to spend one's days distinguishing between on the one hand vulgar marxism and on the other hand a marxism appropriate to the changes in the organization of capitol. None of us can know at all what the structure of capitol is. For one thing we are part of it, for another only a bounded thing can be "analyzed" (but, see above), and it is not that. And, finally, why do we wish to constrain the mind to appropriate response, when it is the mind that makes that world of capitol. Make something else.

7. I now work for myself. That's what I learned. If anyone would pay me, I'd teach for myself (I do seem to know a great deal; drop over some time - you probably know a lot too), but they don't so instead packet filtering routers, virtual circuits, negotiation, managing payables and receivables, closing complex deals, usw. are my daily fun, and I do mean that. They call for no analysis. James, at least so I think, knows about such devices too. Having known each other for going on 2 decades, you might wonder why we've never worked together.

8. Grad student, quit school. But, I can't tell whether Steve Evans or Patrick Phillips or Jeffrey Timmons or Eric Pape or others (very few women, very little evidence of a point of view of color, very little sense of a specifically Jewish pov, very little in any sense specific to anything whatever, informed by anything not on the other guy, yeh guy's reading list. If you are on faculties, quit. Anyway, Ron's right; your industry is heading for a collapse, it has lost all justification.

9. Paul Hoover's position is overwhelmingly informed by work he has done to know, accept and make use of his own sources. Ditto Ron Silliman. These positions are without irony, unhidden in trashy even disgraceful joking that there is no relationship between your person and your position, as if these were different in some principled way.

10. We all have a responsibility, a political responsibility, to make something (dare I use the word?) positive, i.e. existent and contributory to the larger thing which is merely the contributory nature of all that is positive. This means pleasure in writing and a sense of the permission of form beyond theory as the only real contact we have with the unknown, i.e. with value. As above, this is a recursive procedure; it can be justified by nothing outside it. Without being local (i.e. Serbian or Croatian : bonnet blanc, blanc bonnet), it is endlessly specific. Attending to it is a discovery, uncovering, of more specificity.

11. Oh. In 8 above, you may think I'm being dismissive. Or glib, in advising you to quit. You have families, you have to have a job. Sure, no problem. Nor do I take the Platonic position that a slave is one by nature or essence : if not, he'd be dead. After all, I was fired, I wasn't offed! I prefer the Jewish position, be kind to the slave. In the jubilee year, free all the slaves (what the heck, most of them will enslave themselves again). (of course, that's only one of the Jewish positions, i.e. positions in the rabbinic tradition - which is always what I mean by the term "Jewish").

12. I knew a poet once who was quite wealthy - by marriage. He lived well, by which I mean in a bohemian manner and much like the rest of us, all young enough (tho some older than others) not really to notice, to accumulate, difference from where it sprung. In any case, this poet didn't need a job. Yet, a time came when the poet wanted to work. The poet once asked me for a job, but I didn't have one to offer. Some years later, the poet decided to enter grad school, got a Phd somewhere in the humanities, and then got a teaching job and began to live very differently from how we had all lived - in any case, we were all living differently, having gotten older, and that was no surprise. The poet's poetry hardly changed at all.

13. Because of what I say in 11, that is why I have written mildly and without wishing to give offense. It is a subject, what responsibility is taken not to articulate a position correctly but to live a worthwhile life. Don't you think it idiotic to imagine that the conditions no longer inhere for that possibility?

14. There is no such thing as silent prayer. "Oh Lord, bring the arrogant kingdom to an end, speedily and in our days." Anybody know the reference?

From: Susan Schultz

Subject: notes on professions, academic etc.

Since the discussion has lately touched upon issues of nationalism and the academy (albeit in separate "strands"), I thought I'd inject some comments about the ways in which the two are intimately related in the 50th state. One of the foremost advocates of Hawaiian (as in the ethnic group, not simply the citizens of the state) sovereignty is Haunani Kay Trask, head of the Hawaiian Studies department at the University of Hawaii. The issue of Hawaiian sovereignty is much at the forefront of Hawaii politics at present; activists demand everything from greater self-determination under the current system to complete secession from the United States. One group moved onto an Oahu beach for over a year and raised a large sign declaring the formation of a Hawaiian state; after much arm-twisting from the state government, which needs to at least feign sympathy, the protesters were moved into a valley, where they are at least not seen (from the point of view of the governor, that is). Trask, who was educated at the University of Wisconsin, is one of the loudest advocates of sovereignty and one of the most provocative. She's recently come out with a book of essays, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism & Sovereignty in Hawai'i*, and a book of poems, *Light in the Crevice Never Seen*, which is remarkable to me for its absolute conservatism of form and language (though Hawaiian words are sprinkled throughout). In one representative passage she points to the university as a colonial institution (from an essay, that is):

For Hawaiians, American colonialism has been a violent process: the violence of mass death, the violence of American missionizing, the violence of cultural destruction, the violence of the American military. Once the United States annexed my homeland, a new kind of violence took root: the violence of educational colonialism, where foreign haole (foreigners, white people—the two are the same!) values replace Native Hawaiian values; where schools, like the University of Hawai'i, ridicule Hawaiian culture and praise American culture, and where white men assume the mantle of authority, deciding what is taught, who can teach, even what can be said, written, and published.

Trask has been at the center of a couple of free speech issues in the last four or five years; most recently, a cartoonist for the student newspaper took her to task for a poem from her new book, "Racist White Woman." The paper was very reluctant to publish her response to him. Her claim is that the poem is about a specific woman, so that it's not racist (and one of my students, an African-

American, got very upset that some people have taken the poem personally rather than as a response to similar feelings that have gone the other way for too long). My sense is that Trask meant to evoke such a response ("woman," after all, is generic as well as specific). Here's the poem, whose rhetoric is not at all exceptional:

I could kick

your face, puncture

both eyes.

You deserve this kind

of violence.

No more vicious

tongues, obscene

lies.

Just a knife

slitting your tight

little heart

for all my people

under your feet

for all those years

lived smug and wealthy

off our land

parasite arrogant.

A fist

in your painted

mouth, thick
with money and piety
and a sworn
black promise
to shadow
your footsteps
until the hearse
of violence
comes home
to get you.

Now imagine yourselves, if you are white, teaching this poem to a group of students almost none of whom are white, who've grown up in an educational system that has persuaded them that mainland values are better than "local" ones, and who are, therefore, many of them—well, the word ornery comes to mind. This past semester as I taught poetry from Hawaii and the Caribbean, I found myself repeatedly in situations where the overwhelming emotions of the moment made ordinary, rational, academic interventions seem fruitless. And which made my position of authority problematic, at best, since the students had an emotional investment in the material that was far greater than mine. I found that the best, or only way, to deal with it was to set the students up to debate each other, rather than to try to guide them somewhere I wanted them to go.

As for the poem, if turnabout is fair play, then where on earth do we go from here? This is what bothers me most; what is violent rhetoric in this case, is actual violence elsewhere. How can we address the nationalisms that live among us (including native American nationalisms)? How can we balance these against a larger American self-definition, whatever that may be? Yes, the world is Gattifying, becoming more and more international. But it's also becoming more and more local. The idea of the Pacific Rim actually only includes Asia and America—what happens to the islands in-between, with their self-definitions at stake? And how can university professors (my classroom, at

least in this case, WAS the real world) fruitfully participate in these debates?
These are not rhetorical questions!

From: Steve Evans

Subject: Shake Those Dirty Hands

I appreciate the candor with which James Sherry and Ron Silliman have recently discussed their "positions" vis-a-vis corporate power, but I am as suspicious of the subjective titillations of "holding contradictory ideas" (which could easily mean: deceiving myself about the meaning of my actions) as I am of fantasies of a "pure outside."

Ron suggests that he and James and Kit Robinson and Tom Mandel have "gained more" from their engagements with corporate capitalism than they would have from "abstaining" from the "human drama of the marketplace." Since I gather that Ron has "gains" of other than a financial sort in mind when he writes this, I would be interested in knowing more about them. Is it a matter of gathering intelligence (so to speak) that informs one's oppositional work—one's poetic practice, one's political practice as a citizen, one's critique? Is it a matter of actually exercising counter-agency within the arena of corporate power, or of obedience in one domain being converted into dissidence in another?

I have to admit that the politics of occupational complicity do not strike me as especially viable—which is another way, I guess, of saying that the contradictions incurred along Ron and James's way(s) don't strike me as strongly "positioned" ones. (By the way, I intend no disrespect to the personal resonance such contradictions may have for the few people who experience them.) Nor do the "dialectics of the credit card" go very far toward redressing, eg., North-South relations.

There seems to me a difference between saying: (1) our attempt to curtail or abolish the power of capital has evidently failed, and the available "choices"—given this failure—are for the most part unacceptable ones that I nevertheless have to accept; and (2) my ability to actualize a radically ungeneralizable trajectory is in fact a measure of my political acuity and a sign of my superiority to those who "abstain" from "complicity."

The vacuity of "dropping out" is not proof of the acuity of checking in. Both smack of extreme voluntarism in light of the structural exclusions of global capitalism.

One final point, the implicit contrast in Ron's defense of market coercion (qua human drama) is to academia. Not overlooking the structural connections between the corporations and the universities, it does seem worthwhile to point out the obvious fact that whereas the corporations have no interest in Ron's or anyone else's poetic practice, the universities do (and where that interest is not pursued, it can at least be raised; which is not possible within the context of Philip Morris, etc.).

Having said all of this, I remain interested in reading more about James's "rethinking" of organization, and in seeing more from Ron about the "gains" of dirtying one's hands (one must adjust that metaphor, I think, in light of the great keyboard of techno-capitalism: clean hands?).

From: Susan Schultz

Subject: haoles

I'm glad to hear from a "former haole," Eric—though isn't that in a sense part of the problem; can you imagine being a former African American or former Asian American? I'm not sure that the kind of discourse that I quote by Haunani Trask leads necessarily to ethnic cleansing, though it certainly bears resemblance with the rhetoric of ethnic cleansing. And that's part of the problem teaching the material; do you opt with those who suggest that rhetoric is powerful but, paradoxically, not a call to real action? Or do you take it as a call to arms that is intended to include you? If there's a more moderate position to take on the question, which I suspect there might be (being a foolish optimist), will anyone in the heat of the moment actually listen?

I just attended a lecture by David Lloyd on "nationalisms against the state." He talked about the current Irish situation, in which the Irish (whoever they are) are perhaps trading cultural power for economic colonization by the new Europe. The upside of Hawaiian nationalism, so far, has been the reemergence of Hawaiian culture outside the province of the tourist industry, which has "preserved" that culture by presenting it as a self-parody for the consumption of outsiders. Trask wants Hawaiian hotel workers to start trashing the hotels; doesn't she face, then, the increasing poverty of her people for the benefit of re-creating an ethnic and cultural (in this case the same, I guess) identity? She wants and expects culture to do political work, which Lloyd is suggesting may not be possible in the face of GATT and NAFTA. Lloyd suggests that local resistance is possible without the ultimate goal being that of creating a new state on the example of the old, as he claims happened in Ireland in the 1920s. Trask agreed with him on this, which suggests (I hope) that "ethnic cleansing" may not be the result of resistance. The violence may come, instead, from above—as is happening in Russia? I don't know.

Some afterthoughts on teaching: in some sense our horror at Gingrich's being an academic seems beside the point. At the University of Hawaii one simply is the representative of the state, the nation, some sort of American canon. This implicates you in all sorts of things, no matter how liberal you are. Trask is right on this one. One can (as I and many of my colleagues do) cede authority in the classroom, present oneself honestly as a "professor from the mainland with such and such degrees), and then find that in that absence name-calling begins. I don't know, it's a confusing situation to be in. I suppose in the case of

Baraka, which Eric cites, one needs to present a "fair" cross-section of his work, and then argue out what is of value, and to whom. But the ethical pressures are, in any case, immense, whether one includes or excludes such material (and several students called me on the fact that I'd xeroxed her—Trasks's—"racist white woman" poem, but not her erotically charged celebrations of the land). At such a point the instructor's discomfort with authority turns into a kind of nostalgia for it! And alternative authorities are created in the classroom, some of them overt, and some of them subversive, no matter how fair-minded you think you're being.

From: Ron Silliman

Subject: Universal Blisters/Individual Burns

Steve Evans wrote:

- > anti-capitalism involves one in no necessary contradiction in education
- > (necessary is the operative word here), whereas it most patently does
- > in the various enterprises that have been named (Deutsche Bank,
- > Philip Morris, C=O=M=P=U=T=E=R=L=A=N=D, etc.) as gainful employers.
- > That is, you can universalize education; you can't universalize capitalism.

NOT!

One need not be a rabid Althusserian to sing a chorus of Ideological State Apparatuses here. If, as I've been arguing, it's all one system, the only difference between town and gown is one of position within the same set, not "inside" vs. "outside" (There is, to repeat myself, no Out). The sole difference is that one of us is pretending that there is "no necessary contradiction" and one of us is not.

Conversely, capitalism is far more universal than education will ever be. If by that we mean pervasive, in every object we see. And are.

"Universal" in this culture means a white male who went to one of seven universities. (Brown, Steve, is one of those universities, even if it's the low end.) Everyone else is ranked accordingly to how "un-universal" (and thuglike) we might be.

One of the great things about Hawaii is that the delicacy of that lava based ecology makes immediately evident how constructed even nature is. The vegetation came literally in the stomach of birds. And the commonplace birds of the 1950s are not those of the 1990s. Someone introduces a mongoose in one century and it becomes the rat, squirrel, possum, raccoon of the next, having that niche almost to itself. Even the nene goose, the state bird, is "indigenous"

solely because its off-island origins have been lost. There are only a few hundred of these left in existence and the only ones I've seen "wild" were in a parking lot halfway up Haleakala on Maui, begging for handouts from tourists. Since the arrival of Europeans, everything in Hawaii has come through the introduction of capital, both American and more recently Japanese. The Hawaiin guitar came with agricultural workers from Southern California. The national issues tend to obscure all this, which is what Lenin thought they were there for.

Like Eric, I believe it was, I come from a white trash California family, though in a college town (where I am the only member in four generations to have crossed over the town/gown divide and gone to school). Which means no doubt that I have a lot of ambivalent (or worse) feelings about some of these issues. But one illusion I do not carry about is of the university system as anything other than a state subsidized process for training workers, without which the corporations would have to do it directly.

Have we forgotten that all of Chomsky's early grants for linguistics came directly from the Defense Department?

An earlier generation of linguists was subsidized almost entirely by the church, in order to translate the Bible into whatever heathen tongue.

"Necessary is the operative word here" indeed.

From: Steve Evans

Subject: Universal Blisters/Individual Burns

Ron, you are in too much a hurry to dismiss what I wrote last night. I said anti-capitalism as a project does not interfere with any necessary moment in the educative process. I did not say that education is not deeply scarred and distorted within current capitalist conditions.

As for universal = white male Ivy League, please. You and I can both discern the difference between false universalism and true universalism. Brown is a patently and overtly anti-universalist University. One of the central campus battles in the years I've been here has indeed been over its practice of "need-aware" admission policies. Though consistently blocked, this has been a struggle to universalize access to the symbolic and real capital this institution generates.

I have no interest in "pretending" anything. I, in fact, don't take this discussion to be primarily or importantly about myself (though I know what Tom Mandel would say to that). I am saying that if "capitalism is more universal than education ever will be" then all of us are getting burned.

Knee-jerk anti-universalism is one of the tiredest tropes of current (a)social thought. Try explaining to me an oppositional position on Bosnia that doesn't involve universalistic claims of one kind or another. Try explaining why your position on identity politics as the real vulgar marxism makes sense without referring to universalization. In brief, what ever happened to that fibonacci series of yours? Gone with the Laclau-Mouffite wind?

It is fine, though exceedingly abstract, to say there is "no outside." But at Brown there certainly is (hence an "admission" process), and where you work also (hence hiring/firing). And on a different scale, there is very importantly an "outside" when it comes to distribution of resources under capitalist social relations. Illiteracy is a way of being "outside" the alphabet; starvation is a way of being "outside" the chi-chi supermarket. I'm "in"—I attend Brown (and yes there are people here—namely all the ones directly in my "field" in the Eng. Dept.—who oppose my research and teaching practices), I eat and read, I'm having a party for other people who also do these things later tonight. But I'm under no illusion that cause I'm here, everyone is. And I subscribe to the axiom

that you cannot intend your own autonomy without intending that of everyone else (universalization).

From: Ron Silliman

Subject: Re: haoles

One sentence here stands out:

- > My problem with equating the poem with "ethnic cleansing" is that the
- > Hawaiian sovereignty movement is a separatist movement, not an
- > imperial one (as in the "former Yugoslavia").

This would seem to be a "classic" question of a group's relation to power (the center). That which is at the center (or conceives of itself as a center) moves outward, imperial motion. That which perceives itself at the margin merely defines the margin (builds that border). Both seem to involve an essential(ist) xenophobia. Such is at the heart of every identity politics. The relative danger comes from the relation to power, no?

And at the real center comes that almost snow blindness of presuming it's "just us." Hence prop 187 in California and the Bubba vote throughout the US in 1994, revenge of the white males.

Interesting how, given what a "boy" discussion this has been for the past week or so, nobody here at all takes the standard Bubba position, even while the range of politics and poetics involved seems pretty broad. To be a poet makes an internationalist out of many (at least here in the US—Dubravka Djuric has noted how many opportunistic poets in Serbia have taken advantage of the situation there to gather little fiefdoms of state power and how even the opposition Croat and Bosnian poets have quickly moved into nationalist positions that seem to have as much to do with what's in it for them as it does the needs of "their people."

So what is this concept "my people"?

From: James Sherry

Subject: Re: Universal Blisters/Individual Burns

Having been through some graduate school, taught at NYU for a few years, worked as an independent entrepreneur, worked as a capitalist lackey, done manual labor painting outsides of high rises, written 10 books that made money and 8 books (poetry) that lost money, published 75 literary titles, run a non-profit distribution service, worked for the city of New York, and since I am always looking for work to do I figure I have failed at everything I have ever tried to do. In the light of this experience which I do not wish to describe as holier, simply that I have some direct experience of both sides of the fence that is being disputed as well as other fences of the labor market not described, I would expect that any honest look at the corporations and universities described in your letters differ little from each other in their most important respects. Generally universities treat workers worse and do less damage with their output while corporations treat workers better in comparable positions, but engage in risk taking to the extent that their output has a greater direct effect, good and bad, on the society, environment, and individual lives. They make together two of the many kinds of institutions we live with and any attempt to denigrate either type of institution is both narrow and irrelevant. The risks of corporate life now are great. The inability of universities to significantly amend those risks is pathetic. Read today's NY Times re: Bass & Yale.

Transnationalism is a fact. Can these discussions turn that situation around? Can we add an accent to it that will increase the benevolence of our physical and intellectual environment in an entire world? How do you expect to affect it? What is your program? What cooperation does this group offer?

From: Tom Mandel

Subject: Re: Universal Blisters/Individual Burns

James Sherry writes:

> ...that a single world exists whose cultures are merging and their inter-
> section causes these clashes. The emerging world culture is not better
> or worse than the indigenous cultures that are being infected by each
> other.

Well,...

1. No one occupies a position from where it is possible to see what multiple cultures are doing on a world scale, esp. not as the pictured fantasy involves the future, which it is in principle not possible to know.

2. That an emerging world culture (assume it for a moment) is "not better or worse than the indigenous cultures" is either not an empirical statement (i.e. it is an anthropologist's position) or if it is one, where's the evidence? One could certainly argue that the culture of the Roman Empire, for example, as it grafted itself onto and lived off of indigenous cultures all over Europe and the Med. basin, was a disaster for those cultures, tragedy for their people. I don't think James can assure any "indigenous culture" anywhere that the global transformation he sees will be "not better or worse" for them.

3. Someone somewhere ought to formalize and describe an ailment of the intellect that he/she might call "the consolation of terms." Apparently, mere possession of a term like "culture" is sufficient to give its possessor a sense of having risen above the sombre cthonic clash of undescribed human interests whose stake and way in the world is being steamrollered. Get thee behind me terminology.

From: Wystan Curnow

Subject: Re-Academy

Tom Mandel wrote:

>Where are all these posts advising anyone that it is better to work in the

> corporate world (better for who and what)

> And Ron Silliman ... quickly seconded this claim that there have been

> none such.

So I asked my secretary to go through the dept. e-mail files and to see if he could find any. And to have the report on my desk at his first opportunity.

The situation seems to be as follows: on Dec. 6 Ron fired off a post in which he said there was more collaborativeness in the corporate world than in the university world. I.e. on that score (what) the corporation would be better for academics (who). Also on the score of knowing what was really going on in the economy –a must for anti-capitalists. The following day, Tom, himself posted to the effect that the world of commerce was more open, egalitarian, permissive of range than the university world. And that when you got sacked from your job in business at least it was for a good reason. On Dec. 12 James Sherry, suggested that corporations treated workers better in comparable positions than universities.

Well, Tom & Ron, you do make some good points.

I'd like to hear more about the not WORKING for LIVING option. I don't suppose there are too many on the List. About PRIVATE MEANS and how to come by them. There is not much history in this discussion, but I believe the Modernists, especially those expatriates living in Europe, had great access to such means. Is there a book on patronage and the avant-garde? I am, of course, aware that the issue for many is whether it is more dishonourable to work for business or the university, and that taking money from aristocrats or magnates as they used to be called, may be even more dishonourable, but isn't the question: is it possible in this culture to be a full poet, to work for a living as a artist, important to the discussion?

Here there a few residences and fellowships which allow poets a year now and then (the residences are at the universities, and academics who happen to be poets can't apply!), but the full-time artists I know are painters and sculptors. That's a clear distinction, and a pretty recent one here: visual artists can live off their work, poets can't. They need a day job (which is how Bruce Andrews described his university position to me).

From: John Cayley

Subject: Experiments

I've read through and felt challenged by the experiwhat? discussions on and off for some time now. Yes, it is quite wrong to fall into the trap of using the word glibly. Still, metaphors are there precisely to extend the range of words, to allow us to use them where they both do and do not signify what we previously agreed they signified.

I produce texts based on procedures and algorithms similar to those in Charles B's splendid list. The use of such procedures is of course not new, but in this (the network) context we should be much more aware of the tools now available which allow us to make literary experiments using such techniques in 'real time'. Until recently we've known about these procedures and when we've felt ludic we've sat down with siccors and paste. Now, with a little more trouble, you can learn a simple programming language and do the same. But once you've done this, the process of composition, perhaps of writing itself has shifted to a new site. With a machine I can get feedback from the results of my procedures quick enough to adjust them according to non-arbitrary criteria. I can make my algorithms 'learn' more about the given texts and/or my responses to them. I can re-write the given texts so that they are better modulated by the algorithms. This is similar to experimental processes, isn't it? Finally, and importantly, I can provide suitably equipped readers with as-it-happens-but-never-the-same-twice performances of the procedures which they can 'read' on their own screens.

>Don Byrd wrote:

> After a certain point, chaos no longer needed the help of art. To recall

> wild nature in tranquility, to practice nihilistic techniques of art and

> thought, to do automatic writing, or to create chance generated art is a

> pointless gesture.

All I can say is why so? I do not feel that I am making a pointless gesture. Even if all that was obtainable from such procedures was a more liberated approach to the literary experience, they would still be worthwhile. Personally I believe

they are adequate compositional strategies with the potential to produce significant art.

> It seems to me that these experiments at this late date

> call us back to means that are as exhausted as the means of a

> poetry that still attempts to make "ordinary" sense of a world where one

> watch a blue jay crap and thinks of mortality or

> Aunt Minnie.

>

> If we are going to experiment, let us experiment with all seriousness.

I do undertake these (?) experiments in all seriousness. I compose the algorithms and choose or write the underlying texts. I intend to produce something that is fascinating, perhaps beautiful, and that has significant content. Apart from the form and content of the resulting texts themselves, I believe the processes are of theoretical interest (even when using very simple algorithms such as those in Charles' list) in relation to questions of Language as Choice and Chance (title of a book on mathematical grammars by G. Herdan), and the nature of meaning (it's strange resistance to semi-arbitrary processes). If it doesn't work, I can go back to the writing board. It is precisely the late date of this practice that allows me to develop it in this way.

From: Marisa A Januzzi

Subject: discursive disruptions//whether poetry makes anything happen

Greetings from a formerly silent lurker!

With the indulgence of the list, I would like to revive the question of the political content of poetic form, implicitly continuing a discussion which arose at an MLA session called "Poetry: The Visual Dimension." Alan Golding gave a helpful paper about Susan Howe's visual poetics, and during the Q&A, Marjorie Perloff asked "the big skeptical question" (I wish I could remember her exact words!), wondering about the connection between the disruption for instance of the linear form of the poem on the page and the disruption of patriarchy. And Bob Perelman accelerated the question by raising the specter of the "history of the avant-garde."

Since then I have been wondering why poetry can't be construed as having political potential in a metaphoric mode. It seems to me that metaphors (whether formal or more simply rhetorical) not only express but also potentially restage political issues (as in for instance the work of Medbh McGuckian) in educational ways. When Mina Loy chose an open form for her notorious 1915-17 "Love Songs" (THE best since Sappho, she called them) the rhetoric of form and content immediately sent critics into a delirium of invective against free women, free verse, free love... in other words critics got the point before they "got" the poems, a situation which recurs every day in the poetry classroom where students and teachers can usefully confront prejudices in the guise of aesthetic questions.

Ten years ago I wrote an ill-thought-out essay about T.S. Eliot which earned me a 'D' from Kathryne Lindberg and caused this student (from a deeply traditional and right-wing family) to attend consciously to the question for the very first time. Although it now may sound nostalgic to say so, Williams and Olson (also on the syllabus) helped me out...and so did Kathryne, with a magnum of patience...

Language: the parent, not the child of thought? (Wilde)

From: Larry Price

Subject: Politics and derivation

Allen Ginsberg once noted that being an anarchist didn't mean you could throw your trash in the street. Similarly, saying poetry won't feed the hungry masses has about the same meaning as saying a rice grower's fields won't scan or are overly committed to closure. The political can just as easily begin in the rejection of an easy forgetfulness, of saying, Since so many others DO (throw trash, etc.), what would be the point etc. of my not? That sense of resistance is not, I think, about autonomy only, but equally has implications for the intersubjective.

That said (and because I do think it has to do with form), I'd like to air thoughts about Duncan's poetics of derivation. Pushed by Charles Alexander's note on THE OPENING OF THE FIELD, I also went to the shelf, to FICTIVE CERTAINTIES and to AFTER LORCA.

"I find again how Emersonian my spirit is. All of experience seems my trust fund to me; I must CULTIVATE THE MISTRUST THAT ALONE CAN GIVE CONTRAST AND THE NEEDED INNER TENSION FOR VITAL INTEREST. In this I stand almost heretically disposed to Olson's insistence on Melville's sense of inner catastrophe against the Emersonian bliss." [caps mine]

That poetry is a contagion does seem like a good place to start, but Duncan's sense of "back and back and back" seems too comfortably located:

"When I first decided to be a poet...this itself was a disordering of the world and its orders in which I had been raised...I had been preparing to enter that world...but my conversion to poetry was experienced...as being at war with every hope the world before had had of me...to give one's life over to poetry, to become a poet, was to evidence a serious social disorder."

On the other hand, Spicer:

"Things decay, reason argues. Real things become garbage...Yes, but the garbage of the real still reaches out into the current world making its objects, in turn, visible -- lemon calls to lemon, newspaper to newspaper, boy to boy. As things decay, they bring their equivalents into being."

Two senses of disorder, as also many more times than one real, which may be why devotion towards them must be so disordered.

So regarding form, it's interesting to read Duncan's sense of contagion as not being a resistive annihilating rod plied AGAINST convention, to read convention itself as having bred the contagion. The disorder that ensues is WITHIN THE TERMS OF CONVENTION. Whereas the disorder that is Spicer's I read as issuing from the events TOWARDS WHICH his devotion runs. It's difficult not to appear reductive, but, for me, that's the divide in this discussion of form, new or otherwise.

Apex of the M to Thoughts about Engagement

From: Marjorie Perloff

Subject: Apex of the M

Dear Friends:

I was pleased to get the most recent Apex of the M and read the poetry with interest but I must say I was dismayed by the manifesto "The Contextual Imperative," put out by the editors.

Certainly, the post-language generation has every right to want to move in different directions—that's only logical—but the slight on the L poets vis-a-vis politics seems entirely misguided. The editors write "language poetry, in reproducing and mimicking the methods and language of contemporary capitalism, ultimately commits itself to the same anonymity, alienation, and social atomization of the subject in history that underlie capitalist geo-politics." And they go on to compare the language poets to Reagan, Bush, and Quayle!

Come on now! Ron Silliman, Barrett Watten, Bob Perelman, Charles Bernstein, (the most "political" of the L poets) reproducing and mimicking the language of contemp capitalism!? Just the opposite was/is true—these poets have worked very hard and put themselves on the line to break down language so that it couldn't function as the voice of "contemporary capitalism." At the same time, what about the editors? The sentence above is distinguishable from capitalist geo-politics? How can it be when it is a tissue of cliches. The very phrases "contemporary capitalism," "social atomization" "capitalist geo-politics" are nothing but buzz words of the type one hears/sees on TV every minute. Whose capitalism? Japanese? U.S.? Serb? what's it really like? What "social atomization" precisely are we talking about? And let's look at that language in, say, Silliman's work and read it against Quayle's and see if it really IS like that.,

And then what in hell is "radical transparency"? Literally, it means that language is absolutely see-through, which means what language you use doesn't matter because you want to get behind it to the Big Ideas. But the danger of doing this is that you start spouting the language of those "ruling classes throughout Western history" poets are supposedly opposing.

At its best, Language poetry never valorized language "for its own sake" as the editors claim. Nor is it the case that theirs is the only or hegemonic way of writing. But if language poetry is to be attacked—and don't we have enough attacks from the dominant poetic discourses already?—it had better be attacked in a more responsible way than it is here. That means informing oneself about what's really going on around the globe and not just throwing out phrases like "Reagan-Bush" or "triumph of capital"? If there's a blueprint for a new economic program let's hear what it is. In specifics. But surely, in the heyday of Newt Gingrich it's rather ineffectual to drop phrases like "triumph of capital".

A final question: who is to read the new revolutionary poetry (what it will be like remains to be seen) the editors advocate? Is poetry going to "deliver victims from the daily miseries inflicted by the politicians and the bourgeoisie?" How is this to happen? Certainly not via ignorance, as in the statement (page 7) about "wars of the West against Islam and in Asia." In Asia: Does China have no responsibility for 'wars in Asia'? Japan? and Islam: are the Islamic countries really just innocent victims of "the West"?

I would think "revolution," poetic or otherwise, would require a little more analytic rigor than what we see here.

From: Tom Mandel

Subject: Re: Apex of the M

I originally began this as a private message to Marjorie Perloff, to tell her she'd hit the nail on the head in her comments on the Apex intro, meaning to quote to her what Hobbes said of Spinoza – I durst not have spoke so freely (that's a paraphrase, source not being handy), being a Language Poet myself (wch when it happened to me meant being in a loosely-(un)defined and altogether anonymous group of abt 15-20 folks but now means being in an altogether over-commented and literally undefinable crowd of ?3-500?), but have decided to make the comment openly, wanting to add one or two things...

To go from the introduction of the Apex issue in question to the work gathered therein is an interesting study. Mostly what's in the issue is the work of poets in mid-career, many of whom associated (i.e. are associated) with LP – how can this so-called manifesto claim them for a next or new way?

I believe the editors must understand themselves to have chosen these poets in mid-career as illustrative of their (the editors') sense of where poetry needs to go now, as illustrative of the ideas in the introduction. Thus, the making of manifestos (manifesti?) and new movements is reduced from that of actually creating a new poetry to being a thoughtful editor. The surrealists too had their chosen forebears to bring forward (i.e. Lautreamont), but they were rescuing work wch had been neglected and even rejected not putting together a table of contents wch cd as easily have been found in Temblor in the late 80's (obviously, somewhat different) or O-blek in the earlier 90's. Moreover, the relative proportion of forebears (a few) to active perpetrators of the revolutionary new poetry (a triple handful) seems more appropriate than in the case of Apex volume.

Thus new tendencies in poetry as the acts of editors? Sorry, I don't think so. It's hard not to see in this volume a 2d chapter in a different town of the intentions of the editors of ACTS in SF who invented a term analytic lyric which they wished to counterpose to Language Poetry, then went around telling everybody that this was what they wrote. I remember asking Benjamin Hollander (along with David Levi Strauss, the editor of ACTS) what the term meant. Mostly, his answer was that it was what I was writing! (I and others, of course – I don't mean they were vaunting me in particular) No thanks, Benjamin, I'm a language poet – i.e. my work, wherever it goes and whoever it attracts the attention of, is historically located in that tendency. If I write

rhymed couplets I'll be a langpo who does so (well,... that's a little oversimplified, tho not as much as one might think: I mean it's an ostensibly defined term, supplemented with interpretations wch are motivated by a desire to see our work somehow together. there's little else in common between say me and say Bruce Andrews who is a dear, old friend and comrade, or Ron or Lyn; in some sense I believe we will desire our works to be buried in a common historical grave).

The test of the Surrealist manifesto was the work of Breton, Eluard, Peret, Aragon, Desnos, et. al., not the validity of the ideas in the manifesto, somehow interpreted in the presence of some other test but absent the test of new work. I don't for a minute doubt the gifts or motivation of the poets who edit Apex. It would have been better, however, to place the intro before a volume of new writers who simply blew one away (and, gentle reader, you cannot imagine how intently I – and most other language poets I know, tho not all surely – await this experience), where its rodomontade, its stuffy certainties abt historical directions/needs, its empty rejection of the exact social and economic matrix which enabled it (doesn't anybody read the Communist Manifesto anymore? viz. its eulogy of capitalism?) – in such a context, all these qualities would be irrelevant in the face of the experience of a new poetry. A new poetry. We always want a new poetry.

From: James Sherry

Subject: Re: apex of the m...

The Apex if it's M exhibits the superficialities of the dialectic and boy is the thesis the. But the seeds of the M in the L are multiple while the interpretation of the seeds by the M is faulty but understandable. The quotation which I have overused from Wittgenstein helps my explanation. "If we speak of a think, but there is no object that we can point to, there, we may say, is the spirit."

Those objectless things in the L include, but are not limited to, vaguely: the sign: the signified is not the thing, but the idea of the thing, – the body which is a constantly referenced thing but sex in most of the L is skirted to a spirit of the body by both the French and the L, and Language itself which is constantly reified by the L writers; and also create the hook by which the M writers can attach to L and attack. That these things are misinterpreted by the M writers need not be disputed to thwart the attacks by the L writers. They are the places where we have left openings for the next generation of artists. That the M takes unfair advantage of these ideas doesn't matter either, misinterpretation has already been valorized by the L.

The attacks by the M writers are particularly galling, but again represent the same tactic used by the L writers on the previous generation of NY School and Beat writing, although the M writers are less substantive in their attacks on the L than the L was on NY, but isn't that what the M is saying, so at the very least they are consistent.

The sad parts of the issue for me are the lack of recognition of these facts by the L and the unconsciousness of the M writers about the openings which they have left to be eviscerated by not only the next generation of writers whom we can conveniently dub... the Nth. They will rue the day they used the word spirit in their fashion when it is used to attack their right to write as they write. For that reason, the most egregious and annoying part of the M is how they have forgotten the lessons of the enlightenment exposing the weakness of spiritual allegiances and its institutions. But I guess we have to "pay to keep from going through all this twice."

From: Leslie Scalapino

Subject: Re: apex of the m...

Dear James, L&M S&M?, you're right. The most troubling thing is we've now got G.O.D. known only by the (spiritual) authorities (the fundamentalists; and even people saying they're Zen which they want codified, saying even Zen is essentially authority /convention as a positive assertion); where analysis (of one's language/form), or the form being what occurs or where/how it occurs, is to be overthrown as 'conservative.' Or 'merely reactive.' What's to occur as 'vision' must be given one from outside in that case. Yet that again is similar to the L's (on the West coast, usually two or three dominants, by whose ideas the entire group was then characterized - sometimes messages being given in manifesto group style; the point being that this behavior, which is now reoccurring, is jousting for dominance in which value is defined as power not related to literary substance per se, given credence by the stated assumption that displacing one's predecessors and peers is necessary. This is not the same as being a 'capitalist.'): always saying 'Question yourselves (laid bare by writing process), not us, or you're conservative; and you're (politically/socially) conservative by 'definition' if you question us.' 'You' not being an authority. Lew Daly's book on Susan Howe and John Taggart uses the word God as the reference authority about every third line; it's limiting the vocabulary. Similar to Perelman in the past finding the word 'intuition' meaningless, essentially wanting to eliminate it; but not finding the word 'thought' meaningless.

Daly's book is a work of engagement (certainly passion) and complexity, yet his 'God' is as if a given which 'we' are supposed to know (by authority/tradition) (and renders valid the poetic observations?) rather than phenomena 'to be found out' by experience. In either case, elimination of vocabulary is exclusion of words which allow the perception of those distinctions as they are 'making' distinctions; which exclusion is also 'ordering.'

The work of most Language poets is still continually changing and vital as is that of the various multitudinous dark horses, who're always there changing what is occurring.

I think the poetic issues, delineated by the two (M/Language) here, parallel the contemporary religious and political moves; are not merely reactivity by them. For that reason, the Apex of M writing these matters is provocative.

Personally, I'd rather 'react' to a humane rationalist (meaning even the limitations of such a specifically delineated stance) from which 'place' one can bound freely into one's own (inner) terrain, not usurped by anyone, than to have to have 'vision,' 'tradition' and 'spirituality' ('one's own place,' so that one would simply have to make another place) defined and held as a product or a poetic 'position;' which, when defined, and defining as power (as one avant-garde overtaking another), is voided.

From: Tom Mandel

Subject: Re: apex of the m...

In James Sherry's post he rightly sees the apexers critique cum rejection of the Language poets in a continuum with the LP's treatment of the generation preceding. Surely, it is true that this need to get this seemingly pervasive presence out of the way, so to clear a space to write, afflicts or at least affects any generation. I don't like it, but it makes sense to me; I can even see it as a strength of character.

There remains the question of what is done in this cleared space, and by whom.

I'm not sure I understand the first 1/3d of James' post, unless he is beginning to list the features of Language Poetry that he sees as taken over by the Apex of the M group. If so, I'm interested to read a more lengthy treatment of that. Of these non-thing objects.

The influence on some Language poets of the NY school is also undeniable, esp. on the early work of Charles Bernstein, Kit Robinson, Steve Benson, Tom Mandel, and others.

The intellectual rigor of Language theory is also as open to critique as the intro to the Apex volume which lurks behind this discourse (smugly, non-dislodged, I think). You have only to read the banner and statement of intentions in the early Language magazines (w/ =, etc.) to find yourself in an ill-stirred pudding of the Whorf-Sapir thesis, an utterly misconceived version of the speech/language distinction in (oh what's his name; the swiss linguist's lectures – I really am losing my grip if I can't remember his name... and I can't!), and other sinking suspensions. But, this in no way excuses the Apex intro, does it?

All the same, I'm not sure there're any definite lessons of the enlightenment which must be held onto, but James will have expected my disagreement in that matter. I am an utterly secular person (that is, I cd describe myself as an utterly spiritual person), and in some sense I like the world I live in (less and less). But I'm afraid I must say that the secularizing of the world over the last 500 years has not pluralized the world, not at all. Just different and even more baleful idols being worshipped. And it is a pluralizing, call it a creolizing if you want, of our world is all can save it. Purity cults, even my favorite one the Pharisees, have demonstrated their horrendous effects over and over, and these are

magnified and multiplied in a world of weapons and media with such powers to make a hell of difference.

Finally, if, as in the Apex intro I find so appalling, the poet is to be an iconoclast, she will have to knock over an idol and smash it. Another poet is a poor choice to begin.

From: Marjorie Perloff

Subject: Re: apex of the m

It's true, of course, as Tom Mandel says, that every generation needs to clear a space for itself and that the Language poets, as James Sherry points out, did the same thing to the NY poets of the previous generation. And Frank O'Hara and company did it to T. S. Eliot (God save us from fisher kings!").

Still, there's an air of implosion about this latest "manifesto." For one thing, the language poets were attacking an Establishment, but it's hardly the case that today the L poets ARE the establishment. Most people around the country still consider them upstarts if they've so much as heard of them. Let's get real. Secondly, if you want to launch a line of attack, you must have an articulated position. "Violence and precision" as Marinetti put it. It needn't be totally coherent—and I agree that the Language manifestos of the 70s were hardly argued through—but you have to stand for something that's then visible in the poetry itself. I just don't see this "change" in Apex of the M. The poets printed therein take for granted that poetry is written in free verse (or prose) for starters. It's a given. The rejection of a "high style" is another given. And so on. That leaves the manifesto with saying, more or less, we're more against capitalism than the Language poets were and, at that level, the rhetoric fizzles out because the L poets in question had/have a particular Marxist position and carried it through. Ron Silliman, after all, was editor of the New Socialist Review. So if the editors of Apex don't share that position, but feel Capital is the source of all evil, I'd like to know what they propose to do to fight capital.

From: Kali Tal

Subject: Re: apex of the m...

I'm outside both the traditional academic and literary poetry circles. Until Joe Amato introduced me to the work of the Language Poets, I'd never heard them. I like Joe's work (that's why I publish it), but my longest-lasting literary affections lie with "movement" poets, primarily feminist and/or African American and/or war veteran writers who see themselves and their work as inseparable from their politics and their activism. My perspective on the whole apex of the m debate is shaped by a general distrust of manifestos which seem to be substitutes for action, or which are taken as actions in and of themselves. I'd like to respond to some of Eric Pape's comments in that spirit:

>every revolution, including any poetry that pretends to be fully fulfilled

> revolutionary poetry, is written in language.

I am not sure that this is true. In extremity, language is a luxury that many cannot afford. Violent revolutions (and perhaps most acts of physical violence) are not written—that is specifically what makes them violent; pens are not swords, however much the revolutionary (or reactionary) poet might wish that they were, might yearn to make language strike like a blow. My particular critical speciality is "literature of trauma"—specifically, the literature of "survivors" of man-made violence (Holocaust, combat, rape, etc.)—and I have found that a characteristic spanning every literature of trauma which I have yet uncovered is the agonizing tension between the failure of language ("You can't understand!") and the desperate need for language to succeed (You must understand!). Revolutionary poets yearn to write with such strength that their audience is traumatized as they have been traumatized (Jones/Baraka raging that "poems are bullshit unless they are/ teeth or trees or lemons piled/ on a step," wanting his own poem to be a machine gun, reduced to helpless rattatting; the anger is real, the danger behind the poem is real, but the poem can never be real in the sense Baraka desires it to be).

There was, last year, a lengthy discussion of "terrorist" poetics/poetry on the [Technoculture] list—some of you will remember. It seems to me that both "terrorist" and "revolutionary" poetry are impossible constructions unless one is talking about them as documentary (at one remove) rather than actual (the thing itself). Soldiers who write or talk about combat state unequivocally that

language fails to describe their experience. Yet every soldier who writes or talks about combat says something—uses language in ways that fail, though he/she uses it all the same. There are qualities of "revolution" which lie outside of language—the violence that language can describe in the before and the after, but never at the now. The realm of the traumatic event is silence, speechlessness, a breach in the narrative, a space for which there are no words or explanations or stories: THIS ISN'T SUPPOSED TO BE HAPPENING! Narrative constructions come later, to explain, to rationalize, to describe "what happened," but they can never represent it properly, since its nature and impact are derived from the fact that trauma is unrepresentable. There are some truths which cannot be conveyed, some instances in which "only being is believing."

- >It seems to me that Language Poetry is a necessary, but certainly not
- > final step towards a revolutionary poetry because it takes as its project
- > the subversion of language. I don't know anywhere else to start.

The subversion of language is certainly the project of poets like Audre Lorde (whose description of language as "the master's tools," and whose position as the Sister Outsider make even her use of language and the poetic form subversive) and Margaret Atwood and Monique Wittig, and so on. But these feminist poets are not considered (I believe) to be connected to the Language Poets. Nor are they given much serious attention by either the literary or academic establishments (dismissed as "political"—and therefore possessing an "agenda"—as lesbian, as feminist). I am asking, as an outsider myself, the honest question: what is subversive about what the Language Poets? What is the distinction between the sort of subversion practiced by Lorde, for example, and various Language Poets?

- > You can't have a revolutionary poetry that says I am revolutionary and
- > therefore I am going to write about coal miners in the language of coal
- > miners etc. Transparency doesn't exist in the poetic context.

Sometimes I think that we don't see poetry when it is transparent. We don't usually look very carefully at what coal miners are doing... or what disfranchised black ghetto kids are doing... or what working class women are doing... Some of the strongest and most "revolutionary" American poetry is spouted by kids at house parties, and used-to-be-kids who now have recording contracts with major record labels. Ice-T is a poet, though you might not much

like what he's doing (I do). Ice-T is writing poetry about revolution—even if it is not revolution itself—and at least the poetry is being televised (hey, Gill Scott-Heron has a new album out, did you hear?). Black Entertainment Network rap programming and "Yo! MTV Raps" are pretty interesting.

Which brings me back around to the apex of the m intro, which I haven't read, but have now read about at length. It seems to me that one can't be revolutionary without being clear what one is for and what one is against, and without being willing to put one's body on the line for one's beliefs.

(Revolution is risky.) In a culture where a poet can be taken out and shot for writing a protest verse, it makes sense to talk about "revolutionary" poets. In this culture, it might even make sense to talk about some poets that way. But it's real hard for me to swallow the notion of "revolutionary" poets who live in relative comfort and are not actively engaged in taking physical risks to participate in social or political movements. Maybe I'm just a hard-line kinda gal, but I like to save the word "revolutionary" for times when I really mean it....

From: Eric Pape

Subject: Re: apex of the m...

Kali: ... What is beyond language? You speak of the traumatized persons you work with expressing their frustration at the fact that they cannot communicate their experiences; you can't understand; you must understand. This seems to me certainly as you suggested a symptom of the inadequacy of language, but it also seems to see some personality, or personality issues that are beyond or before language. Isn't language the closest thing we have to an identity, a personality? Which means, I think, that identity is something we share with others, exterior. This is what I was trying to get at when I was speaking of transparency as not being in the poetic context. I'd like to amend that and say as far as I know transparency, despite Carl Rogers, is not in any context.

Transparency assumes the stability of both the sender and the receiver. I can't tell you how many times I have spoken or wrote and said not five seconds after that I was full of shit and how could I say such things. It wasn't me who said them I think to myself. The frustration everyone feels with language is in this lack of coherence of identity from moment to moment. There is no rapport; something always escapes.

As far as language poets vs. Lorde and others, well, that is something I'd rather not get involved in. I can say that I think of Lorde's most subversive act is simply being there, unavoidable, unplacatable. What she does with language, which is considerable, is to remind us that there are other forms out there that not only have a right to exist, but have informed the dominant language greatly.

I should shut up about the apex of the m'ers, because frankly I don't know anything about them. Nor do I want to be seen as some language school apologist. I mean, I just got here. Nobody knows me. I'm surprised anyone even listens to me.

I find them interesting (and here I speak of them as if they were already stuffed and mounted on a gallery wall) because I think they have pinpointed where to begin to define an oppositional, or revolutionary, or whatever, poetry. We start at the beginning of poetry, at the beginning of personality, at the beginning of culture. We start with language.

What I find particularly interesting is that not only do many language poets subvert language, like you have properly noticed Lorde doing, but they make a sort of intervention into language. They try to change its structure. If we are to make any kind of intervention into history, this seems to me a model we can work with.

Maybe the apexers are working with this. Maybe not. I don't know. I will say at this point that I think folks tend to discount manifestoes. Must be some sort of American anti-intellectual thing. The fact that both the language poets and the apexers wrote manifestoes is all to their credit as far as I am concerned. If we have learned anything in the last few years of NEA/NEH controversy after controversy it is that the people doing the work had better take the time to define themselves before somebody else, like Lynn Cheney, does.

From: Ira Lightman

Subject: apex of the m

The truth of a process makes sense to and among those at the end of the process, where the transcription of thought on the page is a clean mirror to both writer and readers, writer as s/he writes, reader as s/he reads; the book unwritten is the look that speaks volumes between and among such.

This so rare that most of us do in the name of more, ever more, vocal and verbal, dropped out of empathy then yanked back, the lack of us in "you-you" the vocation of study, time out.

Oscar does not believe that art is being and thought is ugliness. He says so as in his day was no art and thought. Those who use Freud as if he were himself as benign and liberational as they do what he did not put sex against the ban on sex, power against stable.

Such sects! Lift up hearts, prey on. The dream can only create if sleep is not for the provision of rest, o day for rest and night for study. Bade the body. The good faith goads the intellect setting the church of our agenda which, fulfilled, burns. We digest the stone and break into a jog.

Dream breathing. Think, your very heart beating is bleeding and the blood next to come is bleeding into your heart, the oxygen is bleeding to become blood, the folks with beating blood are beating the air only. Dream wing.

All every night walk by the venue in their heads where perfect truth of process plays the energy of creation. All have greater artists than Shakespeare to meet, but every eye, don't converse, few attend, few remember, we are special in knowing we're special not especially.

The perfect dreamer in all, in each, not a speaking to us all. Few go to sleep with the energy to mingle. I know I'm not alone in this. Shakespeare the artist in history, fifty of the sixteenth and seventeenth hundreds of years, everyone is Shakespeare.

The dead can dance. Dreams trot through our excuses, scared to knock such vital guards. The fear's not explained till the dream's not come back against twenty such sentries. Step out of the stage and into the tubes.

Stick to your gun till you blow off your head, walk again on your legs no one else's, carry your seed as she grows in your arms, out of your pain, let her, away from your pain. Think well of yourself, use your hands, get a grip, on the non-carnal gun.

So many arms, swinging under the noosed throats, the unspoken carried on so many legs. Like dream life's accidents, vile, we dream nearer and nearer, the guard hangs in the air, twitching, tapping. We feel bumped into until, joy, we are alive.

The ambient never wake up. Like you don't. You begin to ban humour and alcohol, the mares buck and head for the guards in new hope. Rest is not it, without truth towards process towards truth.

If you're still reading, no-one's got anything. Some should let thoughts fester in the mind, process the festering. I know mortally the years from when I was born, each day the unit of measurement cuts history into me-sized portions, knowing ledges. I dodder to think the art of it.

Sophocles mortal braved Freud, now so less winning. The Freud-led walk through him, more to hurt that if they'd gone by him, on every shelf in every flame-stricken library? Mind how you go. Excavate Plato, afraid to go out, for dream research.

Nothing like life to keep you from dying, the nerves are steel strings, loud acoustic. Song begins the vibration, words reason the entry, into society, largely worthy of nothing so clarity!

Be you once, the harsh heart sooner or timely, a slick into two dimensions, of prose, this nuisance is losing its once fascination, the pattern returns to its usual dynamic. Think in the two, drink in the third, things they don't want to reveal indicate why do you say that.

I get it. Draw on planes, repairing the prairie, the gasses from the busses, the hole us. Destroy two to save three. The hurt behind the face understood yields to surf on the face again.

The month from a flame that took our collection, from our senses, and flashed a banner over a dish of a dominant hemisphere, the northern, a cap with the bill right in front of our eyes. A missable interactive experience, a miserable sky made it so.

Is cool holodeck sky? I sensed it came back to my name, but a short therapist circuits the patient, tree dimensional. I'll take my "clumsiness", I didn't dream "it" up, I ride broken in the bumps of a world I ought never to have believed was mine only thought. Alive-in world.

The process of a sense makes truth to and among those at the head of a process, where the transcription of truth on the page is a claimed mirror to both writers and reader, writer as reader as utter; the book unsmitten is the look that speaks volumes between and among such.

MANIFESTO FOLLOWS SHORTLY

From: Ira Lightman

Subject: CALL FOR A DECISIVE BREAK WITH THE PAST (NURTURE THE APEX)

1) Spiritualism. Never assume that in attacking something as religious, you are not part of a religion yourself. Jung not Freud.

2) If you are going to use the I-Ching, notice how your interaction with it produces a different work than is produced by someone else using the I-Ching. Notice that your works are more like each other, than your I-Ching works are like I-Ching works by other artists. Stockhausen not Cage.

3) Keep listening.

5) Have Pound's decency to look back on what you've represented. Next Generation not Kirk.

8) If improvisation is free, why do many of its evenings go out to the same boundary and no further? Leibniz not Newton.

13) To lecture, Stein milking not mocking a restrained common vocabulary to write descriptions, not Derrida punning and concatenating with abstracts to provoke, always with fixed unspoken loyalties of his own, and not own explicitly. Close to who you pretend?

21) Non-Freudian not neo-Freudian post-structuralism, if any.

34) Gloria Steinem not Julia Kristeva.

55) Fuck gender-fuck, open up genre. Harryman not Silliman. Thresh hold of "becoming" an adult and "no longer" being like a child. Neil Gaiman not Ridley Scott. Nurture, non-sexual love sexual life; actual practice of community, professor. Elizabeth Burns' Letters to Elizabeth Bishop, not Derrida's The Post Card.

89) Hyper-reality and reality, extend, object both ways. Posters and paintings of words not handwritten notebooks. Brush syntax. Johanna Drucker meets Emily Dickinson.

144) The sentence was a good stretch, but now I choose my jailors. Sing energy. So long when you misuse lyric poetry as a prison term. "The voice makes possible the entire continuum from the most extreme consonant-like noises to the purest vocal sound, and is far superior to even the most modern apparatus for creating tone-colours". Stockhausen not Zukofsky, the musical phrase, remember, not the metronome.

IF YOU FOLLOW (OR ARE NEARER TO THIS MANIFESTO THAN TO OTHERS), PLEASE SUBMIT WORK TO "CHEERFUL FOLK POP OUT OF BUXTEHUDE"

From: Bob Perelman

Subject: Government by Irritation [op-ed, Philadelphia Enquirer]

... Government by irritation: it's one of the dominant political modes of our day. Taking their cue from talk show hosts, politicians try to topple their opponents by unleashing discontent. These days the NEA serves as a handy source of annoyance if not outrage: a few well-publicized examples of troublesome art have, over the last few years, been able to furnish a great supply of instant political energy.

It's not easy to argue against such energy. The value of art is not always instantly apparent—and at the same the difficulties art brings with it are much more likely to be perceived at a glance. The latest remarks by senators that the NEA be abolished unless it supports "family values" show how true this is.

Rather than arguing for art that is familiar, obedient and at best ornamental, I think case that art is valuable to the community precisely because it is not perfectly predictable or obedient. That will not mean that unruly art is automatically wonderful. Art is one of the testing grounds between individuals and the community. The point is that it's an opportunity for judgment: members of the community will need to make up their minds. That's one of the basic values of art: it can't be approached dogmatically.

If it's considered in terms of the federal budget as a whole, the NEA is hardly a big deal. The federal budget is around a trillion and a half dollars a year; the NEA budget is \$167 million. If my math holds, that means that the NEA takes up about one ten thousandth of the federal budget. That's less than the military spends on marching bands, less than the city of Berlin spends on public art.

To eliminate the NEA would save each American 65 cents a year. Here in Philadelphia, dance, poetry, the visual arts, theater would all suffer; the gamut of organizations affected would range from the Institute for Contemporary Art to the Please Touch Museum, from the Philadelphia Orchestra to the Settlement Music School. The bigger, more established concerns would take a hit; some of the smaller organizations might have to close. Those who are out of sympathy with the arts might think that's fine: that if a theater company needs a handout to survive there's something wrong with it. But to consider the arts in such a framework is an unfair oversimplification.

For one thing, business itself is not treated in such a sink-or-swim way: government subsidies are an integral part of many industries, from farming to sports franchises. One of the better reasons for such subsidies is that they shield enterprises from momentary reverses. If farmers couldn't survive a single bad season, it would ultimately make for a weak social fabric. With the arts, the time frame is often more stretched out. It can easily take decades for general taste to approve of developments in art. The last hundred years are full of examples. In France painters such as Monet and Matisse were ridiculed by the majority of their contemporaries; there was a riot at the premier of Stravinski's "Rites of Spring." Of course, paintings by Monet and Matisse are now among the most valuable objects on the planet; and thirty years after it had driven listeners into a frenzy of disgust, Stravinski's music was used by Disney as the soundtrack to the dinosaur section of "Fantasia."

These are examples of successes. But it's not always the case that today's innovative art becomes tomorrow's classic. A 1920's symphony by George Antheil that used airplane engines has not yet become a cultural treasure (nor is it likely to). That's important. It misses the point to say "Fine, innovate, be creative. But only if you turn out to be Monet. No duds or wild excesses, please."

But why should the government have to underwrite art? Didn't Monet work on his own? There are a couple of answers to this. For one thing, a significant part of NEA money goes to community groups, often helping get art to groups and places it doesn't normally reach: smaller towns, rural areas, schools that don't have the resources for art programs. And for the government to cut all arts funding would mean that it recognizes no values other than the marketplace.

Under the reign of purely economic motives, there is no way anyone would want to produce something unless it could be sold immediately. Imagine a society in which every cultural product had to turn a profit instantly. If you want to get a sense of how claustrophobic this can be, consider how dominated commercial television is by spinoffs and imitations.

Given how informative, exciting, and revealing the arts can be, what an important antidote they are to instant opinion polls, and how important they already are to various different parts of the community, I think they're worth 65 cents a year. The money is not wasted: people in the arts are appreciative of the little support they get and work hard whether or not they get it. By their very nature, the arts speak to the individual's judgment at the same time as they offer possibilities for building communities: they're perfect training for the

independence and possible sense of connection that we need to live in a democracy. Maybe 65 cents is a bit low. Why not make it \$1.30?

From: Ted Pelton

Subject: Use da news 2

I was happy to see Bob Perelman's Philadelphia Enquirer op-ed. I think that op-ed pages may be as good a tool in this fight as contacting congressmen directly. I've heard many like to sustain their illusions of fingers on the pulse through hometown papers.

This is my column from the Milwaukee Journal, Friday, January 13:

With the recent swing in Congress back toward Reagan-era conservatism has come a new attempt to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts.

The NEA's budget isn't large, but its critics argue that any amount the government spends on the arts is too much, that funding the arts is not a legitimate function of government. Gingrich, Helms and others make this argument despite the examples of other major world governments, nearly all of which make funds available to support art and artists, many at much higher levels than the U.S.

This simply highlights the fact that the main reason conservatives want to stop funding the arts is not to save money nor to keep government's purposes pure. It is because new art is ultimately very dangerous to a conservative world-view. Discouraging the production of non-commercial art in this country is consistent with other aspects of the conservative social agenda: school prayer, limiting women's reproductive freedoms, increasing the amount of capital in the coffers of America's richest citizens. The arts produce work that is often far too critical of such a social agenda to make many friends on the Right. These lawmakers want to silence voices of dissent.

Wisconsin Senator Russ Feingold sees their attempt in the proper perspective, as censorship. I wrote him and several other Wisconsin lawmakers in the past few months to urge they support that NEA. Feingold responded, "I believe, as a free society, we need to protect diversity and encourage the exchange of ideas. I regard some recent attempts to cut funding for NEA as attempts at censorship, and at silencing one part of this discussion."

This position is consistent with the principles upon which the NEA was founded. At the inception of the NEA in 1965, Congress issued a defense of why governments should fund the arts. In part, it read: "The world leadership which has come to the United States cannot rest solely upon superior power, wealth, and technology, but must be solidly founded upon worldwide respect and admiration for the Nation's high qualities as a leader in the realm of ideas and of the spirit."

It also read: "Democracy demands wisdom and vision of its citizens. It must therefore foster and support a form of education, and access to the arts and the humanities, designed to make people of all backgrounds and wherever located masters of the technology and not its unthinking servants."

The NEA is most often reported in the press for scandals involving funding of controversial artists, such as the flap involving late photographer Robert Mapplethorpe a couple years ago. But its programs support the arts in local communities as well. This occurs both in terms of aiding local artists (individually or through local arts organizations) and in such things as helping fund performances by nationally known artists. In my own area, I think of the readings at Milwaukee's Woodland Pattern bookstore, for example; poets and fiction writers of national stature would not regularly give readings to small audiences in Milwaukee, as they do today, without the NEA. For people in your district, it might be the local orchestra or theatre, a travelling opera or ballet troupe.

I confess I am not a disinterested observer of this issue. Last year I was awarded an NEA Literature Fellowship. I take the grant seriously, as an investment in my talent, and I hope my future work merits this investment. The myth of the artist whose vision remains pure despite economic difficulties is bogus; economics do force artists to quit making art and start making money. I was close to giving up fiction writing when I received funding.

But I had also benefitted as a citizen from the NEA for years prior to winning this fellowship. I had attended NEA sponsored readings, theatre and concerts; I had read writers and seen work by artists who had their own careers supported by the NEA; I had enjoyed the benefits of local galleries and performance spaces which exist with the support of the NEA. I happen to enjoy art that isn't commercial, that wasn't created to make money. But even people whose interest in art extends no further than enjoying Hollywood movies should realize that even commercial artists owe a debt to serious, non-commercial art. Art not made for money takes more risks, taps more untouched stores of

imagination, and often introduces the ideas and images that mainstream artists develop for more popular tastes. We all benefit from the NEA.

Art also can provide us with morality of a sort different than the Right defines it. Not simply indulging in tired pieties, serious art, when critical of our institutions and our daily practices, can serve as the bell-ringer to wake up our national conscience. Funding the arts helps foster voices of dissent, a necessity in a healthy democracy.

But Helms, Gingrich and company aren't interested in good art or healthy democracy. Nor is my congressman in Sheboygan, James Sensenbrenner. He has voted to eliminate the NEA for the past four years. He cites the same old cost arguments as the others. But money is a cloak over the real issue: the critics of the NEA want to promote their own set of cultural values while discouraging debate and critique. If money was the only issue, we would naturally expect Republicans to subject far more expensive weapons programs to the same cost-conscious scrutiny as they do the arts.

For my part, I'd rather that someone abroad knew about my country because of American novels than because of American war technology.

From: Don Byrd

Subject: Theory

James Sherry is undoubtedly correct that poetry cannot produce pure transparent immediacy, and it is therefore inevitably supplemented, consciously or unconsciously, with theory.

It seems to me, however, the following points might advance this thread of discussion.

1. Poets are as responsible for their theory as they are for their art, and poets during the past twenty years have often abdicated the responsibility. The theoretical results in philosophy as such and in the social and physical sciences are not irrelevant to poetry, but their use in poetics is limited at best. The poet must think through the same issues but think through them in relation to the concrete practice of poetry.
2. The poetry that is of enduring interest from Hesiod's *Theogony* to Jack Clark's sonnets, Nate Mackey's *School of Uhdra*, Anne Waldman's *Iovis*, and Charles Stein's *The Hat Rack Tree* incorporates its theory in the poems themselves. Theoretically complex poetry otherwise is by definition academic. That is, the theoretical issues are always in play in the open form in which immediacy and thought are always in recursive interaction. This recursion is literally the motive of creative act.
3. One of the reasons this becomes a difficult issue is that more and more poets find themselves employed in graduate education, a very different role to the academic poets of the 50's (who often taught in small liberal arts schools or carried on the liberal-arts-school function in a large university). It does seem to me we might find reasons to object to poems that illustrate this or that hot theory. This kind of poetry seems to me at present a serious plague. It is comparable to the endless iambic tetrameter quatrains that illustrated the theoretical pronouncements of late Eliot.

From: Ron Silliman

Subject: Boy Talk

Am I right that Rae Armantrout's comment about the San Diego Union article on Freely Espousing (a full 10 days ago) was the last posting by a non-male reader of this list? What gives? It feels like the shower room at a men's health club....

Here's a question or two for (primarily) the non-males who read this list?

Why do you lurk without posting?

What would it require to change this?

Are there other venues (listserv discussion groups in particular) where you are more active?

If so, what do they do differently?

From: Charlotte Pressler

Subject: Little Mary Sunshine

Ron Silliman's question (why do so few women on this list post) tempts me to delurk briefly.

I enjoy reading e-mail, including the poetics list – but this form of communication, like any other, seems to have its strengths and limits.

E-mail seems to me to be a good way to ask specific questions and communicate specific kinds of information rapidly and effectively (book lists, the Freely Espousing communiques, calls for papers).

It's also a good way to argue positions for the most part already formed. The quick cut-and-thrust of single-screen messages, though, seems as though it might hamper the reception of more tentative or exploratory postings.

People read their e-mail fairly quickly, and I don't think many people save it for later reading or download it to a printer. Disk space might be limited, too – at least it is at UB. So, for the most part, once a message is scanned, however it's scanned, it's gone. Not much opportunity for re-vision.

So, apart from its bulletin-board functions, e-mail seems to work best for people who like to respond quickly and concisely to well-defined arguments.

I prefer to have a good bit of time to think over a written message, and to publish it in a format that allows for re-reading. I've stung myself in the past by offering too-rapid reactions; but I've also found that in sharp debate, reactive responses come to dominate over exploratory ones. So I find it best to work through my own often somewhat divergent responses to current topics either off-list, or in work written for print publication, or in conversation with friends.

Possibly this is a gender difference; I'm not sure it's entirely that. There's also the uneasy position of divergences that don't quite attain to the sharp clarity of an oppositional statement. I tend to diverge in just this way – should I call it "radical opacity"? :-) So I tend to lurk on lists, including this one. Apart from this post.

From: B. Cass Clarke

Subject: Quan Yin

... I would like to add to Charlotte Pressler's remarks the following:

Generally, the mechanics of vms mail editing is not intuitive. I have spent the last week learning how to file mail to folders. I learned the ins and outs of engine repair faster.

The nature of these lists – they are generally anonymous. Although the poetics list relies more heavily on the signifying name than others, I feel like I'm walking into a room with a blindfold on surrounded by others whose state is unknown.

Under these conditions what is a toy and what a weapon? I've noticed there are whole trees devoted to teaching people how to inflect their remarks by using 8-) > type symbols. Obviously this media, or the people that write how-to books about it recognize there is some problem having to do with what is written and its intent.

This list by its title invites writers to perform. So far, I've seen a series of challenges, duels and target practice. It is a public arena where we watch our gang try to make something of it. I suspect that if any real conversation gets generated, it does so off the public screen. I have found such correspondence through this list, and value that.

Normally, I would post this to your e-mail address. But in the spirit of your inquiry, I reveal myself.

From: Kali Tal

Subject: Re: Boy Talk

Ah, drawn out of lurkdom by provocative questions.... tho I must admit, quite sheepishly, to be responding in exactly the spirit that Joe [Amato] has described—I do so hate to be predictable...

> Why do you lurk without posting?

Well, I don't really lurk without posting. A couple of weeks ago I wrote a fairly lengthy post describing why I feel—as a publisher and editor of two poetry series and miscellaneous individual volumes of poetry, and as a literary critic with "academic" credentials—like an outsider in the POETICS conversation. My post met with resounding ... silence. Didn't garner a single response on the list, though I did get backchannel notes from my old friend Joe (hi Joe!) and from Charles Bernstein (hi Charles!). I've been active on the internet for a while, and I don't take nonresponse personally, but it does generally seem to conform to a pretty gendered (and racialized) pattern. Since my concerns revolve primarily around issues of how race/gender/class interact with the theory and practice of "culture" and "art" (including poetry), whenever I post, I bring up these issues. Nonresponse is something I've certainly gotten used to. Now I tend to post only when I feel that I've got something pressing to say, and when I am met with nonresponse, I usually let the matter slide, unless "becoming visible" seems like a battle worth fighting in this particular place at this particular time.

> What would it require to change this?

Oh, it would be easy to get me to post more.... But it would require that someone(s) actually engage me in public conversation, offer a response to my words. Think of the studies of male/female conversations which demonstrate that women introduce a wider variety of subjects than men, but that fewer of the subjects they introduce are picked up and expanded on. And the ones which show that when a woman brings up an idea it's often ignored, until a man brings it up—at which point he gets the credit for thinking of it and she continues to be ignored. These patterns are evident in email as well as in face-to-face conversations. But email is even more difficult for a woman to negotiate, in my opinion, because the lack of physicality, the reduction to a textual "body," makes it harder for her to be SEEN/READ.

Look at it this way—email is one of the few environments in which anyone and everyone can "pass" as white, heterosexual, and male unless he/she speaks/writes out against that normative body. Now, there are advantages to being able to "pass" in this manner (advantages that members of marginalized groups have always gained from passing), but there are also costs. The advantages are clear for women—no sexual harrassment, no more being ignored, no more being marked as "other." But the disadvantage is that passing requires adopting the language and interests and style of the folks you are passing as, and so concerns and questions and styles that might be significant to a woman as a woman become unspeakable. On the other hand, in this environment in which everyone can "pass," it takes constant vigilance and a great deal of ingenuity to create and perpetuate a nonwhite nonmale and/or nonheterosexual textual body—difference must be inscribed in each post in a way that makes it visible to the reader. The paradox is that "passing" allows women and nonwhite people to be "visible" in the sense that they are not treated as "other," but it is predicated on the disappearance of gender/racial identity. On the other hand, refusing to "pass," and insisting on inscribing a nonwhite or nonmale identity in our email results, often, in our being "disappeared" in the manner in which women and nonwhite people are "normally" disappeared. The entrenchment of the normative construct in espace (which I tend to think of as The Unbearable Whiteness of Being) makes me feel a lot like Ellison's Invisible Man—I've been in flamewars in which I have textually kicked the shit out of people who simply **COULD NOT SEE ME**. (And if you haven't reread the opening sequences of Invisible Man it might be worth going back to, since it sums up exactly the phenomenon I am describing.)

>Are there other venues (listserv discussion groups in particular) where

>you are more active?

I used to be very active on quite a few lists. I'm the Typhoid Mary of flame wars—where I post frequently, they usually become epidemic. In my Bad Old Days I could come out swinging against racist or sexist exclusion in discussions and rile folks up so bad that hitherto peaceful (read: "homogenous") espace communities would polarize and then shatter. Grown men would act like children and storm off lists or publicly swear that they were never going to read another one of my posts. Heck, I've pissed people off so badly over email that at least one has, in all seriousness, threatened my life. (And yeah, those threats of violence—and implied rape—were gendered, too...) But I don't do much of that sort of posting anymore. Mostly, I just needed to experiment with it for a while to figure out how it worked. And I concluded, after some very serious

thought and long study, that there was no way for me to be visible "here" in any of the ways which mattered to me. So I now confine my occasional public espace forays to "raids across the border," with the intent of making the population nervous, while at the same time escaping without serious wounds. And I have always figured that the only way to create a "level playing field" is to build it yourownself, so I got together with some like-minded people and started SIXTIES-L, a moderated discussion list in my field of study. I don't even post there that often, but it is definitely a woman-friendly space, as is demonstrated by the high percentage of women posting to it. Which brings me to the next question:

> If so, what do they do differently?

Well, it seems to me that moderated spaces, or restricted-access spaces provide a more hospitable environment for women. I've been on women's-only lists, and in those places women have no trouble posting at all. As I said, on SIXTIES-L we moderate the discussion, and one of our rules is that we don't allow ad hominem attacks: you can harsh on people's arguments or texts all you like, but you can't slam their characters. This level of protection (applied equally to men and women) might have something to do with the higher percentage of women posting on our list. The only unmoderated list I know of which supports an overwhelming percentage of female posters is WMST-L, the Women's Studies list for educators and academics. WMST-L is technically unmoderated, but Joan Korenman is one of the most competent and active "nonmoderators" it's ever been my pleasure to observe in action. WMST-L might work so well precisely because it is mainly populated by feminists—and not only feminists, but women specifically dedicated to the work of building Women's Studies as a field.

Hey, Ron, thanks for asking...

From: Nada Gordon

Subject: where the boys are

"Why don't more women post" is a rhetorical question, right? Everyone knows why.

(Or did you mean, "where are all the poster girls?")

Camille P. might say it's because we are neither skilled nor schooled in the art of directional peeing – although her urine describes a pretty well-targeted arc.

Ron and Spencer, I extend my hand in gratitude for your chivalrous patronage ;-). And Joe, you sound like a sister. You all employed one of the pedagogic strategies I suggested in my first posting out of three in total, (which was about the reluctance to speak): teaching the verbally aggressive to use gambits to draw out silent interlocuters.

My second posting was a short one I intended as a respectful message about a poet whose works I love. I did not realize someone might find it offensive, and just, uh, shot it off. It's the one Ira called "dumb" and reacted to so vehemently. He and I have since had a volley of private e-mails first furious, then apologetic, with invitations to continue the dialogue.

Public nudity. Like this posting.

For a day though I was traumatized by my first experience of being flamed as I walked the streets of Tokyo in a tormented stupor wondering if I really was dumb.

I have already pointed out to Ira the irony of that choice of adjective.

Anyway that's why I don't post or speak so much in male-dom public forums, although my voice is always wanting to vibrate.

Is it so imperative that we (girls, I mean) seize the reins of (mainly male) academic discourse? Maybe, but I'd rather be on a different kind of horse, and take off the stupid uncomfortable bridle – and be free to let Pegasus(sa) go where she wants, like I just wanted to say that I wanted the horse to be a pink one, not in spite of it being a dumb thing to say but precisely because it is

dumb, and liking the fresh coy challenging dumb hollow echo that bounces off it.

Dumbness has unexplored potential in poetic(s) language, (especially in this age of academic piranha-ism) at least as a backlash or contrast or as a kid beholding a naked emperor. The dumbness of koans.

I read in a lot of poetics list postings desires to "get things hammered out once and for all" – to be right. Being right is not always essential to me when I'm having a conversation – which act can be conceived of as an opportunity to swap paradigms. Is the calendula more right than the hyacinth? How would you define "flesh-colored," or "eye-level"?

I may be falling into the trap of analyzing discourse from the perspective of biological determinism – intellectually suspect (I just came back from a great performance of Henry VI, in which Queen Margaret – admittedly a character developed by The Boy Bard – verbally kicked ass harder than anybody), but empirically observable, too.

Like the frequency of qualifiers in "women's" language. Re-read this message for conditionals, maybes, seems, etc. Or that men often (another qualifier) have two voices (surely countless more), a public "war" voice – often heard on this list – and a personal voice, more modulated. As Tom Mandel's former secty. (Tom, you did call me "honey" now and then) and B.Watten's former student, I should know.

I like this list best when information ideas observations parodies accrue, not when it sounds like a dogfight that needs hosing down. Even then I like this list a lot, even if it is d***-wagging bigshot-laden and, as one woman writer wrote to me "boys talking about boys' books". It's a techno-miracle for me to be privy to its world while I'm marooned on this archipelago.

From: Cynthia Kimball

Subject: Ghosting

Ghost that I am—or is ghosting an act, so I "ghost" but AM not a ghost—I read these messages invisibly, until now silently. I FEEL invisible and safe that way, to be perfectly honest. I'm scared right now writing, don't even know if this post will post, don't want to expose my silence my silent reading presence. Female that I am—or is female-ing an act, so that I can "check my gender at the door" (no double meaning intended), be a ghost pass judgment and take sides and change my mind with every new side there is to take without exposing the vulnerable new sprouts of opinions to the frost while in the process of sprouting them.... Is my silence because I'm female and feel left out or am I leaving myself out because I'm female or am I a temporarily ungendered ghost because I haven't claimed my USERID in front of anyone yet for whatever fear-full reasons. I could choose a male pseudonym that would protect my silence a little longer. I thought about it. Anyway

I'm going back into the ether for a while

From: Susan Schultz

Subject: boytalk

Kali persuaded me to put this direct message to her onto the list:

Kali—thanks for your remarks of late on "boy talk." As someone who has tried several times to engage the list in conversation, I wanted to suggest that the question of "tone" is perhaps a gendered one. I don't want to over-simplify matters, but Deborah Tannen's model of male and female conversations seems to work as well on this list as it does in my freshman comp class. I got on another poetry list, populated mainly by new formalist fans, where women write in a lot—or at least two women do. But far less signifyin' is going on.

Several people, including one or two men, did contact me directly about things I'd said; it would be interesting to talk about messages between listees that aren't sent to everyone. And now I'm doing it. I was disappointed, however, when I tried to bring "multiculturalism" into the conversation, and discovered that these radical language poets, some of them, are quite reactionary in their literary politics.

So I guess I'd suggest redirecting Golding's remark about tone; he brought it up in the right context, but we were then swept right back into boy talk. More than needing to talk to women, they need to ask more questions; Silliman's posting came rather late in the day.

From: Loss Glazier

Subject: Re: boytalk

On gender in postings, some here might be interested in Susan Herring's paper, "Gender and Democracy in Computer-Mediated Communication." The background to Herring's linguistic research:

→ Since 1991 I've been lurking (or what I prefer to call "carrying out ethnographic observation") on various computer-mediated discussion lists, downloading electronic conversations and analyzing the communicative behaviors of participants. I became interested in gender shortly after subscribing to my first discussion list, LINGUIST-L. Within the first month after I began receiving messages, a conflict arose (what I would later learn to call a "flame war") in which the two major theoretical camps within the field became polarized around an issue of central interest. My curiosity was piqued by the fact that very few women were contributing to this important professional event; they seemed to be sitting on the sidelines while men were airing their opinions and getting all the attention.

Some of Herring's remarks:

→ Recent research has been uncovering some eye-opening differences in the ways men and women interact "online"...

→ My basic claim has two parts: first, that women and men have recognizably different styles in posting to the Internet, contrary to the claim that CMC neutralizes distinctions of gender; and second, that women and men have different communicative ethics – that is, they value different kinds of online interactions as appropriate and desirable. I illustrate these differences – and some of the problems that arise because of them – with specific reference to the phenomenon of "flaming".

Herring's full paper is available via the web version of the Electronic Poetry Center under "documents" then "conversations." Use lynx or a world-wide web browser to go to: <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/e-journals/ub/rift>

From: Juliana Spahr

Subject: Re: boy talk

Reasons why I might not respond at any given moment:

- * the conversation goes too quick
- * a fear of conversation getting out of control
- * I rarely tend to respond to non-personal messages of any sort

(my minor input into this list has been indicative of my role on other lists, including the women's studies list)

- * the feeling that the list is mainly boys talking about boys books or boys talking to boys, I must admit, also plays a part

I am not sure how much of this has to do with gender.

I do understand the serious nature of the technology-gender problem (and the technology-race and the technology-class problems), the poetry-gender problem (which I am not sure how but continues to remain a serious problem despite a large number of active women poets), and various other social-induced, gender-related ills.

I do not know how to counter act them.

I do not want the conversation on this list or any other list to have to be policed by some sort of affirmative action of response or mention.

I just wish society was different, I think, that people were a little more self-aware of what they talked about and how and to whom. I guess the only answer I can suggest to Ron's question about how to get more women to respond is to fight for the overthrow of the patriarchal system which is the cause of fewer women being wired. Nothing short of that is going to do much, or maybe, mean much. I wonder if there were equal amounts of women and men on this list if the gender construction of the conversation would not be more equal.

I am not sure there is a gender proclivity to lurk or not lurk.

I do not want to be a woman all the time either.

Part of me wishes I were not responding to but rather disavowing this gender narrative.

From: Kali Tal

Subject: Re: boytalk (fwd)

Hi, Cris; Hi, Susan—

It is better, yes, to take the dance off the back-channel and perform in public. Posting is performance, a new kind of art; writing in motion, more like improvisation in jazz than literary composition—skywriting, lightwriting, sandpainting, here and gone, happening in time.

Cris [Cheek] asks:

- > So, I'm curious. You obviously read this list, do you feel that the struggle for the production of both constructive and critical meanings
- > (maybe simultaneously) whether for language or through language is irreparably fractured into constructs of identity OR are you suggesting
- > a need for more pro-active polymorphous traffic? It's not intended as a
- > 'trick' question by pro-active polymorphous traffic? It's not intended as
- > a 'trick' question by the way.

My answer is, Yes. And this is not intended as a 'trick' answer. See, nobody's got just one construct of identity: I am this, but I am also this, and this, and this, and this. To be whole, we gotta keep moving, shifting from perspective to perspective, so we don't leave any of our ownself unaccounted for. Each declaration of identity is a "construct," and reflects only a part of the whole, so if we hold onto it too hard, we lose the point, which is that constructs are useful, but that they shouldn't, can't contain us. Language is the tool of our fragmentation; at the very moment we describe "how we feel," we have already left our whole selves behind, because the description accounted for the feeling of the moment ago, but not of the now. Identity is a process, not a thing. So we need to counter the fractures with an attempt to create a pro-active, polymorphous traffic inside our own selves and between us and others which takes into account both the necessity and limitations of constructs of identity.

i yam what i yam

a world-changing fiction

a trickster

a chimera

a heterogloss in my own time

And, Cris, I'd rather start from the position that we're all human beings and therefore not to be trusted and to be trusted at the same time.

When Susan (hi, Susan) sent me her note backchannel, I urged her to post it to the list because it seemed to me that she was saying exactly what needed to be said out in the open. The question of "tone" is really important, and those of us troubled by the "tone" of discussion on POETICS ought to out-and-out talk about it. (Thereby, perhaps, changing the tone.) It's no accident that one woman (Susan) has brought up the issue of multiculturalism, and another woman (me) has brought up the issue of the (unintentional, but also unnoticed) exclusion of African-American, feminist, and other identity-oriented poets from the discussion, and that there was no response to either woman's post on the public channel. Most white, male enclaves are pretty happy to stay white, male enclaves. And why wouldn't they be? But POETICS is not a white, male enclave, it just operates like one. So I figure that if the women here quit letting it operate like one by entering into and changing the discussion, then we can carve out some space for ourselves, and begin to build a community where some real exchange can start to take place. Even in the worst case scenario—the men ignore the women, and the women talk among themselves—we can still illustrate that the problem exists by enacting it (and archiving it) as a text. Of course, that's a lot of work to expect already overworked women to undertake, but perhaps, in this venue, such work can pay off.

What follows is a lengthy rumination about gender in espace, including some excerpts from items I've previously posted on another list:

In January of 1993 I was part (perhaps even instigator) of a massive flamewar on the TNC (technoculture) list. The flamewar revolved around issues of gender and women's voice in espace. I learned a great deal from this discussion, and I've gone back to the text files again and again, coming away with something new each time. Juliana (pleased to meet you, Juliana) writes that she "does not want the conversation on this list or any other to have to be

policed by some sort of affirmative action of response or mention." I agree. Policing rarely works in any situation (doesn't stop crime, does it?). But I've noticed that what I fear more than policing itself (since policing on the net is really quite rare) are accusations of policing directed at those of us who dare to criticize the speech and/or "tone" of others. (And, yes, this does resonate with the "political correctness" argument the right uses to make the left appear more powerful than it is...) Like Juliana, "I do not want to be a woman all the time either." In fact, the ability to "pass" on the net is a real relief to me, and I use it frequently. But passing is just... passing. What I'd really like is for it not to be so exhausting to be a woman. At any rate, let me share with you a short piece which I wrote in the middle of the TNC flamewar, after suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous distortion (accusations of being a wounded, vicious person, a manhater, blah, blah, blah) and weathering what can only be called a storm of abuse, name-calling, and red-faced fist-shaking. (Not that I didn't dish it out as well as take it, but then, that's the point I make below...)

Simultaneously amused and appalled by the narratives different male listmembers were writing about "me" (the person behind the narratives, to which none of them had any access), I explained:

"It is my pleasure in electronic communication to attempt to respond in the style in which I am addressed, and, at times, to address the issue of style itself. Lacking physicality (obvious race/gender characteristics), I find that it is simple to engage in stylistic shifts in space, whereas it is very difficult to engage in such shifts in person. One of the results of my stylistic adventuring has been my realization that textual style is as gendered and racialized as the physical body—though passing in space is easier than passing in person. What I find, however, is that when I publicly position my gender as female, and then insist upon "competing" in "rational" (masculine) discourse in traditionally masculine terms while simultaneously insisting we focus on issues of importance to women, all hell breaks loose. The pattern is quite predictable: certain men will grow completely infuriated and claim that I am attacking them because I hate them. They will also impute all sorts of power to me—as if, in their eyes, I "control" the discourse—"Kali's game"—and depict themselves as victims of my rage..."

In fact, the upshot of the TNC flamewar, was that I was accused of being a machine. George Landow wrote:

**"KALI TAL IS NOT A PERSON BUT A TEXT-GENERATING
APPARATUS INTENDED TO PASS THE TURING TEST AND AT THE**

SAME TIME TO EXPLORE THEORIES OF SELF-REPRESENTATION AND PRESENTATION IN CYBERSPACE."

I don't think George really understood what a really nasty shot this was. He took a long time to explain why I must be a machine, ranging from the fact that I wrote too much too fast to be human, to reducing my posts to an alleged "decision tree," to the outrageousness of my name (which, amusingly enough, is actually the name on my birth certificate), to claiming that my arguments were rational only if I was "part of an experiment to convince other participants that this digital text assembler is a real person." The last part of Landow's post was a rumination on which particular TNC listmember had "written" me. The irony, of course, is that I truly was trying to convince the TNC audience that I was a real person. As I am trying to convince you.

To end the TNC flamewar, I admitted to being a construct, an Artificial Intelligence produced by some grad students in the History of Consciousness program at UC Santa Cruz. I also pointed out:

that if a machine speaks/writes to you

and says it wants to be treated like a person

it would be a good idea

to take it seriously.

I think that there are people out there who are still confused about whether I actually exist, either in human or machine form. All the trouble was caused (is always caused) by my attempt to inscribe my gender in my texts. And as I've mentioned, these days I don't post much anymore. I've posted more to POETICS than any other list (including SIXTIES-L, where I am listowner) in the last year. I am curious about this space, and what will/can happen in it.

From: Sheila Murphy

Subject: Re: boy talk

Jorge's comments suggesting that women use their time (more) wisely helped bring to mind a few responses I have to the entry of the list into my sphere. I'd hesitate on conjecturing any firm relationship between what I am about to say and my gender. Let's just call it one person's fraction of response:

I tend to devote considerable time to reading and making texts, as do we all. My long-time career in business/organizations has necessitated my clevering along and managing to eek out time during conferences and the like to do two things at once, i.e., listen to a presentation and capture notes PLUS scribble up a draft that seems just right for just then. And airplanes and hotels are gifts. I love that quiet, which I always use. Hometime during nights has been prime time for writing, too, despite packed weeks whose days overflow into the softer hours. The attention required to absorb and then respond to what is on the list is potentially extensive.

Even before the gender contribution patterning discussion came up, I found myself fiddling with how I wanted to approach all this. I've always corresponded extensively via trad post. And therefore welcome opportunities to be neighborly in new ways. Funny how the physicality of trad correspondence comprised just a few steps too many for most people to carry out. Now many more are willing to go into long discussions, which I value, but for which I hadn't quite formulated a time/space segment in an already busy schedule.

I think that someone mentioned earlier (much earlier) that we've not begun to use this medium up to its potential in regard to sharing work. I was delighted recently to receive a lengthy piece via the net. And treasured the late night read of that. Perhaps such a pattern would spark whole new worlds of interest on the list.

From: Kali Tal

Subject: Re: Boy Talk

- > I guess that I'm included in Kali Tal's statement that males didn't
- > respond to messages by women.

I guess you are, if you are a male person and did not respond to messages by women.

- > I must say I haven't noticed anyone pick up 2 per cent of anything
- > I've posted to the list, about children's rights, ablism, or AIDS activism.

I am interested in nonresponse that is part of a larger pattern. It may be that nonresponse to the particular issues you mention signals an attempt on the part of the POETICS community to "disappear" those issues. Nonresponse to those issues, however, does not indicate that my observations of nonresponse to women as a group are inaccurate or insignificant.

- > But then, if I may make a clearly signalled snide remark,

And why would you do this? Why is a snide tone required? Not that I am surprised—women who bring up gender inequity in, ahem, mixed company, are often treated to snide comments, as if we were, by our mere presence, threatening and offensive, needed taking down a notch...

- > if the alternative is to be co-opted into the movement one may be
- > "carving" (interesting metaphor), in the way that Kali Tal seemed to
- > "welcome" Juliana Spahr as an ally when Juliana Spahr was raising
- > some issues Kali Tal didn't respond to at all, then I shall happily go
- > back to lurking from all sides of this discussion.

And whose "alternative" is this? Your response is a nonresponse, it is not directed to me, nor to any of the women who posted to POETICS. Rather, it is a summary dismissal based upon no apparent consideration of any of the issues

raised by any of the women; a declaration of freedom from obligation to respond, as if nonresponse were a virtue; a rhetorical device used by a fellow who would rather not say so baldly, "Hey, let's talk about me for a minute." Since it does not include a constructive suggestion for a new topic, I read it simply as a sulk. I welcomed Juliana Spahr's voice (hello, Juliana); whether she is an ally or not is no consideration of mine, since I am not currently fighting a war or planning a coup. I am interested in hearing more women's voices and more men's voices, even if they are raised to disagree with me.

The role of curmudgeon suits some men well, though when women attempt to play it they are most often redefined as witches, bitches, or shrews.

And it is very good to see the lurkers come out to play.

From: Ann Louise Vickery

Subject: Delurking /Delousing/Coming Clean

Having only joined the poetics list a short time ago, I have followed the gender trouble (let's get out of the old binaries of boys vs girls at least) discussion with great interest. It seems that the concurrent discussion on the relationship between theory and practice would be more interesting if it passed beyond rather than below the abstract limbo stick to speak in terms of greater specificity—which aspects of practice have been institutionalized, which aspects are still excluded from the academies, can this be linked to trends in pedagogic practice such as the teaching of certain theories over others or how they are taught in relation to poetry. I have appreciated the comments of Kali Tal (hello Kali!) as well as all the other women who have contextualized gender problems on poetics list from their own perspective.

At this point, I would like to "delurk" and try to articulate my own politics of location. I am a Melbournian doctoral student ... who is researching ways in which contemporary poetry contributes to feminist cultural practice. I also teach a course on postmodernism which has such items as the Hoover anthology and Laurie Anderson on its syllabus. I am interested in the challenge that the internet offers both in terms of poetic community formation and discursive horizons.

It is not surprising that the net creates its own disciplinization and exclusion effects; rather we should be asking how these can be changed. Although statistics are the fool's creditcard, my information was that women make up only 5% of the population who use the net. So the poetics list is obviously attracting women to enter its space. The question then arises as to which women and how they engage with the net both as a medium and as a practice. Being Australian, I am speaking on the margins as a not-so-dutiful daughter to the many on the list who are or have been associated with Language poetry in one way or another. Yet, as part of the university, access to the list was easier for me than it is for many Australian women who are interested in contemporary poetry and poetics but who feel isolated. The net is one way in which such isolation can be dissolved.

From my Asian-Pacific position, I cannot contribute to matters of US funding and I feel that much of what is discussed on the poetics list has a localized politics of which I am uninformed. However, I feel that such a connection is

invaluable-whether taken up in more active ways or not(my lurking is not necessarily passive and can be tactical). I am therefore content to "listen in on" than query much of what goes on in the list. That's all I'll say for now if not just for another voice and two cents in the debate.

From: Colleen Lookingbill

Subject: Re: Gender and theory

Having just subscribed 2 weeks ago I am new to this kind of list email thing. Wanted to put my woman's voice into the mix. We are all survivors of patriarchy, that fact is genderless. How you choose to respond to that fact is up to your response - ability. The kind of continuous one-upsmanship, king of the heap games that are seem apparent on this list are characteristic of a patriarchal system in my opinion.

About what Alan Golding wrote:

"On the recent theory exchanges: interesting that the theory discussion and the boy/girl talk have been going on simultaneously but in parallel lines, without much crossover. What's the relation between theory (the tendency to theorize, the kind of theorizing that gets done) and gender?"

I found the gender discussion to be the more interesting of the two threads. To me the theory discussion seems kind of weird - do I really read that some people are saying that to be a good poet you have to be a theorist as well? Sorry, but this makes no sense to me. Unless the idea is that by writing and thinking about what you write and how effectively your creativity is working you are doing theory. Theory that interests me the most is more experiential - based on this is what has happened to me or what I have observed in the stream of life and this is what I think about that, less academic in nature than what is being posted, I'd say. I'm willing to read the more technical and academic stuff, but probably less likely to participate in those discussions. Don't know if this is gender based, but it might be, does seem to fit in a little with what other women are saying about responding more to the personal.

From: Spencer Selby

Subject: Response and Another Try

I appreciate this forum, and I think it's great that more people are contributing, both women and men.

The following is an attempt to respond to all those who wrote me over the past week, plus others who didn't. It is also an attempt to clarify or do a better job of indicating certain feelings and concerns that I have about the literary world today.

- 1) My argument is not with theory per se. My argument involves claims that are made for theory, uses to which it is put and effects it often has.
- 2) I am for the freedom of the individual to think things through for himself. To do that, s/he must fend off or overcome pressures to conform to correct ideas, which today are formidable.
- 3) I believe the discourse and social reality surrounding poetry has become more important than the poetry itself. When I said poetry was on its own level, that was nothing more than an attempt to counter this sense of skewed priority that I feel pervades the scene.
- 4) I am concerned about the degree to which all communication surrounding the poetry is framed as "literary politics." I am concerned about the dominance of this frame, the way it all becomes a game we play to the detriment of our art and its greatest goals.
- 5) What's matters to people in this literary world is not community. What matters is spheres of influence. Each person's spheres are a little different and some have more or broader spheres than others. But these spheres are not communities because they are motivated and defined entirely by the dynamics of personal and literary influence.
- 6) Much energy is directed toward appreciating and understanding those within one's approximated spheres of influence. (The stronger the sphere or link, the more the energy.) Far too often, alienation is the keynote with respect to everyone else.

7) Denial is an important part of the game. There are many different ways of denial, too many to list here. It may be that denial, more than anything else, is what keeps people playing, what allows them to stay focused and do what is necessary to be good competitors.

8) What about the person who can't or won't play this game? My feeling is, that person doesn't have much chance. My feeling is, you're forced to play if you want to survive as a creatively engaged poet in this world today.

From: Sheila Murphy

Subject: Thoughts About Engagement

Spencer's most recent post quite clearly crystallizes some of the concerns that have been discussed around theory/participation/community and the like. His post brings to mind for me the extent to which it perhaps always has been true that there's little room, certainly in art, and probably in most things, for the pure entity of THE PROCESS AND WHAT'S MADE to exist without that entity's being propped up by loads of self promotion. An unspoken kind of currency exists in many realms of endeavor. Specifically, having "something to trade," some commodity to hold/exchange/seek that puts one on the board at all. This offering can take the form of publishing, producing programs, critical perspective published or spoken, and undoubtedly several more. Spoken opinion or assessment concerning someone's work, where and how it fits, what new ground it breaks, etc., has particularly high value associated with it. To me, it has always been true that this kind of exchange pattern has been present. But with the abundance of material and of distribution channels (be they small/large, unofficial/official), including the machines we can access to share them, there's been an escalation of need to create focus on any given work. (Sort out something that seems to deserve light) However people fare within this system, combined with their own needs for recognition, (and these are not the sole variables!) seems to connect to levels of frustration or levels of felt reward. I suspect that the struggle to be counted forces many people to have to expend far more effort than they would choose just getting into the middle of things and being perceived as complete.. This, of course, can rob time from producing work one cares about producing. I feel this among people in the earnings world, too. So much energy goes into getting one's name out about one's business services, etc., that there's too little time (sometimes) left for doing what one does. This whole issue seems pertinent to the theory question within the world of practice. I hate to put theory into the category of "must do," as though it were something no one would do if they didn't have to, because it's at least potentially worthy and elegant and illuminating an a thing unto itself. (Transcending the level of inventing a frame within which to illuminate what one is doing!) But for some people, at least the writing about writing aspect is a price to pay to get closer to what is wanted.

I have no particular answer for this except to say that the sooner one can pursue something at the center of her or his passionate concerns, without the

requirement of having to "pay dues," the more satisfying and possibly meaningful the work can become. I suppose that dues paying will always be with us (But try not to think of it as often as I think about my work!)

Close Reading to Doing the One-Two writing/teaching

From: Peter Quartermain

Subject: Close Reading

Can someone please tell me exactly why the "close reading" of texts is such a reprehensible practice? I notice it came up in an oblique sort of way in the Silliman Fan Club brouhaha, and I'm probably showing my complete and utter ignorance and stupidity. On 2 March Ron said that "I've been trashed for close reading before (by Don Byrd among others), as if the practice itself were politically incorrect (rather than the uses to which it once was put a full generation ago)." However one reads Silliman's prose I would not think he's instructing his reader how a text ought to be read, but recording how he himself reads it (and what he thinks &c &c) on one particular occasion in a particular context.

I'd assume that the opposite of a "close" reading is not so much a "distant" one as a "vague" or "inattentive" one (though I'm not at all sure exactly what those words mean in this context). Is there a point at which a "vague" reading gets to be reprehensible, or preferable? (And so on.)

This is not a facetious question. I like reading, and I'm really interested in the sorts of strategic decisions people actually make when they read; I'm interested in how they read (I'm not at all that sure how I read, either, come to that, and if I have a method at all it sure changes a lot, day to day, book to book, poem to poem). I'd have thought "close reading" would be less rather than more reprehensible, so I ask the question in all seriousness.

From: Keith Tuma

Subject: Re: Close Reading

It seems to me that Michael Boughn's "demonology" is largely accurate as an account of the use of "close reading" in many circles today—many in the academy do seem to set up "close" and "contextualized" reading as (false) binaries, attributing the former to the now vanquished practices of New Criticism. But there are other attacks on "close reading" coming from other directions, within and without the academy. Here "close reading" seems really to mean something closer to "controlling reading" or "controlled reading." Charles Bernstein's poetics of "errant singularity"—Altieri's phrase—seems to use the phrase "close reading" in that second way, for instance. Thus in *Artifice of Absorption* we have the following: "The obvious problem is that the poem said in any other way is not the poem. This may account for why writers revealing their intentions or references ('close readings'), just like readers inventorying devices, often say so little: why a sober attempt to document or describe runs so high a risk of falling flat. In contrast, why not a criticism intoxicated with its own metaphoricity, or tropicity: one in which the limits of positive criticism are made more audibly artificial; in which the inadequacy of our explanatory paradigms is neither ignored nor regretted but brought into fruitful play." Or one might look at the recent *Exact Change* interview with Michael Palmer, where, discussing "voice in Stevens" and the appropriation of Stevens by New Critics Palmer says, "I think the reason that finally—after initially ignoring Stevens, perhaps because of his difficulty—the New Critics began to attend to him was because they could finally see the control of tone, etc., as susceptible to close reading. And I think I've always tried to undermine close reading, to make it unreadable from that point of view."

It seems to me that we have two problems then—how to dismantle the binary Michael Boughn refers to, and how to present a model of close reading which would allow for openness, uncertainty, and generosity to stand in for the desire for "mastery" always—perhaps falsely, it's been so long since I read them—attributed to the New Critics. But this is not really a problem, as we have no shortage of such models, your own excellent work included. Not that many in the academy are paying attention anymore (I'll echo Boughn's "alas").

Anyway, that's my two cents worth of banalities from your local dimestore on this Monday in the Year of Newt and His Company of Lizards.

From: Tenney Nathanson

Subject: Close Reading

talkin' bout my generation, I guess, but: re: close reading, and who unlearns, supposedly, what they learned as undergraduates, and so on. (I don't mean to rant but): after teaching poetry/theory grad courses the last few years, I finally decided to cash in on a gathering hunch and teach, at the grad level, the kind of course I sometimes offer at u.g. level and that used to be offered all the time: "close reading" that is. I'm having a great time (some students are, some probably aren't) but so far the results are pretty staggering. We're doing the course as a workshop, in which a poem and its explication, xeroxed in advance, are discussed concurrently. And (to me) it's just staggering what the generally bright and able students don't have a clue about and don't (yet) by and large have much knack at all for doing. Just on the very basic level of poem as speech act or Burkean symbolic action; or when it comes to thinking about trope as somehow functional in a reasonably sophisticated way: it's a great big blank by and large (w/a couple of stunningly smart exceptions). I dunno whether it was always that way (that is, contra Richards, whether no matter how many classes everyone takes basically 10% of the people have an ear and the other 90% can't buy one) or not, but I suspect that not so much deconstruction & all as cultural studies is partly responsible. I don't mean it as a discipline (or non discipline) so much as how it gets filtered into the brainpans of the undergraduates who end up applying, at least, to Arizona, where the students are quite good but it's obviously not Berkeley, say. Even at the next level up—reading the essays on poetry that come in to Arizona Quarterly, say, it's really just themes themes themes.

So this doesn't continue to sound like only a dispeptic rant, I guess I'd want to say that the course is a whole lot of fun (for me anyway), that I intend to offer it every couple of years, and that I think the old close-reading staple has pretty much disappeared from the u.g. curriculum and needs re-instating. But it really is astonishing to me, still, the extent to which grad students in the course write essays/explications tht have virtually nothing to do w wht I understand reading poetry to involve. must be time to power down here.

From: Maria Damon

Subject: more on close reading

forgive me if i came in too late on this subject and missed important opening salvoes (i just joined the list y-day)—but it seems that when people refer to "close reading," they have in mind a very particular and historically circumscribed set of concerns—not only foregrounding the materiality of the text itself (words) but a certain vocabulary that is, indeed, inherited, relatively recently, from the agrarians/new critics. but there has always been "close reading" and an hermeneutic/exegetical/interpretive process—in the sense of careful attention to the material structures of a work— of one kind or another — whether from a rhetorical (medieval) perspective or other —many people read religious texts, the bible or koran, with a close attention that would put prosodists to shame —and there's no need to fetishize the kind of close reading we learned in poetry classes as the only close reading that enables intimacy and respect for a text. much good cultural studies work —for example, see daniel boyarin's writing on talmudic traditions —combines a close and charged relationship with the structural/formal elements of a work with broader concerns. that's all folks—

From: Patrick Phillips

Subject: cloze reading

The notion of close reading, parsing, fakes an ideological neutrality that we've all come to know as a right-wing excision of the social because it relegates the poetic act to an independent linguistic domain. This embrace of the idea beyond the motivation of it is a close (cloze) reading – a cold embrace. The fold, or moment of discovery, comes when we are not parsing "The Idea of Order at Key West," the lay of the land/sea as described by a resolute metaphysician. This is par – the task of close reading as an encounter with the independent idea is equal to the face, or aspect of the writing. It seems to me the real moments of discovery lie in the friction between the practice of distilling and a poem that refuses, or complicates that distillation through, for example, it's linguistic opacity and/or cultural "position." In these contexts, close reading becomes an engagement with that friction, the totality of languaging, the rubbing up against the social, the motivation of the poem cutting in one direction, while the idea of the language tumbles in another. It is here that there is a determination of reading as a process of the social, because here our belief in the distinction between language and motivation is tried. So, in this trial, close reading becomes a passionate exchange of the social and the linguistic; the linguistic becomes/is the social. Close reading in this case is really close. We begin to parse, or closely read ourselves.

From: David McAleavey

Subject: Re: Teaching close reading

This thread may have more relevance on the T-AMLIT list, or perhaps on some other, but I have to agree with Tenney Nathanson that the university's emphasis on theory & cultural criticism takes both undergrads and graduate students away from close reading. How crucial is close reading to writers, to poets particularly? The students I teach who have most interest in close reading are those who take as many creative writing courses as they can.

But the different types of reading – pertinent to different types of writing – a "close reading" of works by most of those subscribing to this list might not much resemble, task by specific task, a close reading appropriate to poems written by those in that other, dominant, not-precisely-parallel tradition (as can be found discussed, say, on the CAP-L list).

But it could be that NT's point is that no matter the difference in poetic ideology or practice, a critical reading strategy which involves reading-with-a-purpose (i.e., to explore cultural or economical conditions imbedded in various texts) may not need to include close reading strategies. Reading for "pleasure," however, or reading to "understand the author's meaning or purpose" – those tasks do involve close reading (no matter the poetics, I suspect).

The grad-level seminars I've been teaching the past two years make me think students haven't learned much about close reading; but most find it valuable to get an introduction. Minds are malleable....

Most of my teachers, I think, were excellent, so maybe my experience differs from the norm. Still, I did have some losers thrown in there, and surely some of them were just being tendentious under the guise of doing "close reading." From such you wouldn't learn much of anything, of ear or eye. We've all had enough bad teaching to know what it's like to feel stepped on.

The best writers, theorists or poets, have paid a lot of attention to things – for example, to the prosody of the first seven Cantos. "Close reading," the way I intended it, is just a subset of "paying attention." Reading page after page of "close readings" of poems, on the other hand, wears thin pretty quickly. Let's just read the poems, I want to say!

In my earlier post I spoke simplistically of teaching strategies of close reading pertinent to different types of writing. That's not right. We certainly can learn strategies for reading, as we can learn strategies for finding our way through the woods; but we can't know in advance the "type," if there is such a thing, of a piece of writing. We really do have to read it, I guess.

I had tried to suggest by using "scare-quotes" that I understand "reading for pleasure" to be a complicated if not illusory notion, but yes, as a practical matter, people who read poetry frequently will tend, I think, to read it carefully. That doesn't mean that everyone is open to poetries which do things differently from what they like to have done, or what they are used to liking. Pound's problem with Whitman may have been that Pound didn't see carefulness in Whitman's work. Or maybe he just didn't like it and so couldn't read it carefully.

And now I'll tiptoe back to the shadows..

From: Kenneth Sherwood

Subject: Intimacy and intimations of a micropoetics

1. Confusions of terminology: "close reading" v. intimate reading as if theory and 'to read' can nae share the same bed. And deconstructions be damned, there is not a spirit of MIS-READING (in the academy anyway) despite the prevalence of misreadings there.

2. Fact is that "close reading" as method gallops toward singularity, imperial resolution of the chord and production of the cadence. So to Charles A., if only "close reading" could be for pleasure. How would we name it?

3. Within the hallowed halls if prophylactic theory promotes safe texts and declining intimacy, our loneliness may not be quelled through explication. Brooks and Warren are at peace and the students don't read, agreed, but the spirit of "close readings" climactic S&M mastery over the poem lingers.

4. "I can't read this poem; I don't understand it at all."

Sure if anecdotal evidence of an authoritarian effect of close reading's ethic of closure.

5. Good to talk about the "pleasures" of "textually intimate" readings. Of course the risk of accumulating first a mass and then a theory.

In fact to talk so (as some have begun to do) would perhaps bridge the gap (an imagined gap as Ron Silliman (will the real Ron please stand up) demonstrates in various theoretical yet intimate readings in New Sentence) between the two threads on this list and between theory and "just reading the poem."

5b. Just Do It?

6. Pleasure this week of hearing Ric Caddel (from NE England) read and give a reading of Bunting, an intimate reading complete with overhead projector that gave intimate elucidation, made it possible to hear with the ears

7. Suppose the theory monolith has turned the academy's ears away from particulars of reading, strayed from the text ye little lost lambs; causal (coincidental) correlation with the fading of poetry (however read,

misread, or unread-but-theorized in the past) in general from the sanctified syllabi?

From: Eliot Katz

Subject: more on close reading

In a lecture, I once heard a terrific Rutgers University left political theorist, Stephen Bronner, talk about a philosopher who described artworks as containing internal dynamics and external dynamics, a phraseology which I've found really helpful....

As I understand it, the major critique of New Criticism's way of close reading is that it too often ignored the external dynamics of poems—the relationship of texts to important matters (historical events, human lives, political ideologies, etc.) outside the text.

In so doing, the New Critics privileged certain poetic elements (e.g. textual ambiguity and indeterminacy), and unfairly marginalized others (e.g. more determinate explorations, often radical explorations, of the social world). In *Repression and Recovery*, Cary Nelson does a good job of looking at poetry from the first half of the 20th century that was marginalized by New Critical standards, without denying the quality of the poetry which New Critics championed. It seems to me that, by considering both internal and external dynamics, it becomes easier to talk about the literary value, as well as the radical potential, of a wider range of poetic styles.

From: Hank Lazer

Subject: close reading

I've thoroughly enjoyed the postings of the last several days. I find the list taking more and more of my time, but I am learning and engaged. Thanks to all.

When I was at the [20th Century Literature] conference in Louisville, it was great to meet a number of you that I'd had only known via e.

Of the current discussion, probably winding down?, on close reading, I wanted to raise a related issue. Peter had asked what would be the opposite of close reading. Inattentive reading? Non-intensive reading? As others have pointed out, the allegedly conservative nature of close reading has to do with its institutionalization via a textbook: *Understanding Poetry*. (It's my impression, that Jed Rasula's forthcoming? just released? book will discuss this history.) In my opinion, recent theory "advances," particularly those stemming from deconstruction, have, in a different context, reiterated "close reading" methodologies, but with much greater play and with different metaphysical stakes.

But the issue that I would like to raise is the relationship of close reading to theme-based reading. It seems to me that much close reading ultimately gets down to a process of unification of the explanation of the poem by means of a thematized understanding. While much (most? all?) newer/innovative/experimental (take your pick) poetics have to one degree or another overthrown such habits of unification and closure, many discussions of poetry end up defending "new" poetics as having rather traditional modes of meaning (as theme). As various of y'all have pointed out, cultural and contextual readings DO lead in different directions (and sometimes away from a close consideration of that great new critical polestar, the text itself). But even so, especially in the domain of the multicultural, many readings boil down to assertions about "content" (a close cousin of "theme").

In one of my poems in *Doublespace*, I had written that to be "thematized is demonized."

Is close reading inevitably tied to "theme"? Is "thematizing" inevitably associated with retro modes of mastery—a kind of strip-mining of the text?

From: Tony Green

Subject: close=intimate

It is interesting to see that Close-Reading can be such a hotly contestable term. (I suppose that this is a problem not of poetics at large simply, but of a pedagogic situation for poetics.)

What are we talking about? Reading, re-reading, reading again & again, over & over; reading through, reading around & as Ron was saying mis-reading (traduire=trahir)...putting into relief this & that for the sake of the other, (the Other)....

Working with images (pictures etc.) what is often wanting is a good stretch of time for what is on, in and around the image to come to light.

Call this close-reading & spectres of "fascist" practices associated now with the sins of New Criticism (oh boy! these -isms again) appear! Call it the slow careful detailed intimate & thoughtful reading or viewing of a "work" or "piece" or " ".

The question then arises how much of the extensive critical, aesthetic, theoretical, historical literature in any of the arts is grounded in this process? Or even better, the question might be how little.

I suppose that reactions posted recently to the close-reading of New Critics is grounded in readings of New Critical texts. I must "confess" that I thought F.R.Leavis's practical criticism lectures were among the most exciting & stimulating events of the 1950's in eng.lit. at Cambridge, because there was a widespread lack of close-up attention to texts in respect of "values". Whether he was right or wrong was not consequential, because he always insisted that questions of value were always open-ended. The usual alternative attention to texts was that of annotation of detail. (But I suppose that is not what the objection to "fascist" New Criticism is about, given the American Agrarianism argument. But then I wouldn't want to take up the positions of Michael Fried in relation to the values of Abstraction, while I still admire the persistence and specificity of his critical writing).

There is a problem in "higher" education that stems from the difficulty of close or intimate reading (I too like "Density" and "Difficulty" & "Opacity" as points

d'appui). It is easier for students to sidestep it and get rewarded for translating theory instead (for many younger academics) or (in art history) to do iconography and annotation and cataloguing (for older academics). There is resistance to taking time and space for the specifics of a "work" from both directions (new & old, so to speak). Radical and Subversive is what it may well be in 1995 to do close, intimate reading.

Call it perhaps "description", description of artworks. "Describe a picture", as an exercise for students, immediately raises the problems barely sketched above. It is probably impossible to specify with any precision (the too many variables in communication processes, Sandra Braman?) how to do this exercise. Lack of specification is interesting: it allows for students to determine specifications in the actual occasion of writing. (This kind of work is best carried out as far as possible from university grade systems, because the protocols for description are so unspecific).

From: Loss Glazier

Subject: Re: Intimacy and intimations of a micropoetics

1a. Close reading, closet reading, closet reading, closed reading. Do we impale texts or are they, constituted as texts, offered within a definition of closure, as closed?

2a. Galloping toward singularity but for a single "reader," no? Is not the singularity (or single array of possibilities) particular to this reader and only trots to "resolution" when a singularity is imposed on others? As to pleasure, it is true in fact that tidying up is a pleasure to some. Does the text differ from a disorderly kitchen?

3a. Yes, possibly the pressure of history. Hallowed halls, etc., have taken their toll and do cast their monolithic shadows by restricting textual terrain. Does close reading equal explication? The former is a kinder phrase but carries the tenor of the latter. Is it my schooling? Did anyone get graded on explication? Does this mean there is a right answer? Time for a little alto?

4a. Maybe not an ethic of closure but a fear of elevation? Is not any "formal" writing elevated? If it's not, "Hey, buddy, can you spare a rhyme," then what is the entry point for someone not conversant with the conventions of the elevation? Walk for ten minutes then rest five...

5a. The mass does turn to theory and this perhaps is the most difficult moment. (Some might say after theory it continues to a consumer product.) But this is not "theory" as a district attorney (we are speaking about law here) would use the word rather the fear of imposed consent. But do not our means of production offer a route out? Or am I under a delusion?

6a. At the reading thinking - this was a break away from what constantly overwhelms me: daily work - "What I need to hear is some elevated language." (Also dialect.) And boy did I need to hear some elevated words. It is elevated: physically, of course, there is a stage - in this case a podium. But the reading voice offers words that are set. That is, written in some other frame of place and activity, transported, and delivered as if encased, framed, "on the crispest sheet of white paper," I think I noted. Setting up the dilemma perhaps instantly.

7a. Most probably that the monolith has penetrated through original texts to secondary and the tertiary. For the syllabi of the lambs a lullaby. If poetry were to fade from the academy should it not be carried on by word of mouth? Is any comment on text theory? Or close?

From: Lisa Samuels

Subject: close reading

Hank's question about the thematizing of close reading prompts me to make a point which partly echoes Keith Tuma's posting of earlier this week. Though 'experimental criticism' allows, or anyway tries to allow, for uncertainty, for embracing 'the inadequacy of our explanatory paradigms' (Charles B's Artifice), the majority of published readings of literature aims – must aim, for respectability if not for very publishability – to demonstrate that its readings & therefore its conclusions are the BEST way of seeing particular texts. (which seems to come, in some dark past way, from religious methods of textual explication: in order for us to be right, everyone else has to be wrong, but must also have to do with the human desire to have a right answer, & to be the one who provides it.)

That's obvious enough, but it made me think that the academy has two types of close reading: one publishable and one pedagogical (or speculative, say). the latter may be the realm of free play, the one we happily teach to students, the 'isn't it interesting to consider what happens when we pay attention to these lines in this way'; but the former is still mostly stuck in the justifying, & therefore almost inevitably thematizing (line 'meanings' lead to poem 'meanings' lead to thematic meanings lead to historical, contextual, &c meanings, to sew up everything), mode of close reading, the one in which 'when we say of something that it is true, we say that it has stopped' (to use Alan Davies' formulation, in Signage, of how static the notion of truth is for us moderns).

The published realm of close reading, then, has an off-putting rigidity, historically, while the pedagogical one is a beautiful & permitting part of reading language.

Isn't this fun?

From: Eliot Katz

Subject: more on close reading, theory, politics, etc.

Before I go off on different tracks, I'd like to ask those who've noted a lack of undergrad ability to do close reading whether they think that correlates with an increased student understanding of history, current events, political theory & other matters of social context, or whether they find it part of a more overarching crisis in U.S. education? I'm also assuming there are many thousands of exceptions, am I naive? Regarding close reading, Kathe Davis wrote: "Anything can be TAUGHT tyrannically, but there is nothing INHERENTLY tyrannical in being urged to be more aware."

I agree. (Perhaps contemporary critics exaggerate the New Critics' lack of concern for social context? Were New Critics also exaggerating predecessors' lack of attention to textual matters?) Overall, I don't really think any particular style of literary criticism, nor any particular style of poetry for that matter, is inherently progressive or reactionary. For instance, among deconstructionist critics, as among the modernist poets, politics ranges from democratic left to fascist. I think we always have to try to avoid a priori assumptions based merely on form or style, and take an actual look at the particular work (again, both its internal & external dynamics) & make a case for our reading or judgment of it. (Re the matter of attaching inherent political qualities to literary styles, let me begin to walk out on what is definitely a tangent & possibly a limb.) I think one tendency that can lead to imposing a priori political labels, often used to dismiss certain styles of criticism or poetry out-of-hand, is a tendency to conflate conceptual categories. This seems pretty common today. One of my favorite contemporary examples is the post-structuralist theorist, Lyotard's (highly influential, I think) conflation of the philosophical concept of totality with the political system of totalitarianism. Besides conflating categories, that equation also seems mistaken on the practical level, since the concept of totality was used (among others) by some marxist thinkers who were clearly theorizing the extension of democracy into all spheres of public life (e.g. extending democratic rights to the working class) to ensure that no leaders could remain unaccountable or outside the rule of law & in order to safeguard diversity. As Daniel Singer has pointed out: during Rosa Luxemburg's day, using the phrase "democratic socialism" would have been like saying "buttery butter." No matter what other disagreements one might have with some of these theorists (e.g. problems with teleology, orthodoxy, etc.), many were clearly

working for a more democratic society, not a less democratic one and it seems silly to blame these theories of extending democracy for the eventual and often-horrific development of "actually existing socialism" in the Soviet bloc.

... This conflation of categories also seems to me to occur in some language poetry theory where traditional narrative & syntax structures are sometimes conflated with the rules of the existing state—rules that interconnect with language structures, of course, but that aren't reducible to language structures. (I'd appreciate corrections here, since I'm still trying to learn this stuff.) In this argument, as I understand it, breaking the dominant rules of syntax (or creating non-narratives or anti-narratives in Jerome McGann's formulation) is seen as an inherently radical act. But it seems to me that both narratives and anti-narratives can be used for different purposes—both potentially able either to help promote notions of progressive social change or to help protect the status quo. (Re the latter, I think of TV commercials that appropriate techniques of modernist juxtaposition; corporate paper shredders; government documents & speeches that are filled with huge gaps in narrative & logic, sometimes foregrounding language at the expense of content, in order to mystify the public or maintain plausible deniability; etc.) I think part of the tendency among poets (myself included) & literary theorists to conflate conceptual categories (esp. the literary & the political) is the result of some part of us hoping that our writings might by themselves transform the often-distressing political reality of our day. But, as much as I wish as a poet that I could believe in "magic bullet poems" or, more to my political preference, "magic nonviolent civil disobedience poems," or even "magic post-structuralist deconstruction of oppressive state apparatus poems"; and as much as I think terrific poems often derive a good deal of their energy from their attempt to achieve such a magic transgressive political ability; it seems to me more helpful & honest to think (heuristically) of categories like poetry, politics, economics, etc. as distinct spheres that interrelate in complex and mediated ways—i.e. spheres that are not conflated but not autonomous either. The fun & challenging part then is to explore the ways they do (& might possibly) interrelate under particular (past, present or future) circumstances. For example, one can consider ways in which particular poems might interconnect with social context by raising an audience's political consciousness, inspiring alternative ways of thinking, urging commitment, offering shrewd historical critique, envisioning healthier social reconstructions, etc. I don't think contextualizing precludes close reading, since I don't really think it's possible to talk about a poem's relation to social context without looking at the text's internal dynamics. Poems, then, written in a wide variety of forms and styles, including poems that explode traditional syntax & also poems that use traditional syntax, can potentially be seen to contain

emancipatory elements which a reader or critic (using a variety of critical styles) can draw out. That doesn't mean that all poems will contain emancipatory elements, but just that one has to be open-minded enough about questions of form & style to actually look.

One nice thing about avoiding the conflation of literature & politics is that different criteria for evaluating poetic and political realms become possible. (I guess I feel post-structuralism & langpo theory have done a valuable job in helping to correct what may have been an overly determinate way of reading literary texts, but added a not-very-helpful overly indeterminate criteria for judging politics.) Poetry is free to eXpeRimeNt without getting called too bourgeois, too esoteric (or too didactic) or some such a priori label often meant to dismiss a poem so that one doesn't need to read it. (Poetry is also free to explore lots of areas besides politics, and also to offer pleasure, etc.) At the same time, more determinate and normative judgments are possible in the realm of politics in order to arrive at (to even debate) bases for united actions, common principles & platforms, agreed-upon strategies & democratic structures, etc.—all the stuff required to build the sort of organized political movements that are ultimately needed (along with raised public consciousness) to create lasting radical, truly democratic & egalitarian social change.

From: Maria Damon

Subject: Re: what does it do?

> Now, I wldn't want to discount the importance of emotion, but, as i'm > sure we've all encountered, this sort of definition often results in the

> writing/reading of a lot of "Hallmark verse," as well as in the

> establishment of a sort of poetry-as-therapy paradigm.

>

> steve shoemaker

I'm interested in this recurring formula, the hallmark-card verse, invoked as anathema to all serious modernist/postmodernist sensibilities. when i ask students to research "micro-poetries," i include greetingcard verse as an example of a micro-poetry. how can these despised, commercial fragments –or the paradigm of poetry-as-therapy, as in psychiatric-ward workshops –be understood in terms of the "cultural work" they perform? rather than dismissing them out of hand as trite and derivative, how can we use them to understand, as shoemaker suggests, the multiple "purposes" of poetry.

From: Maria Damon

Subject: Re: what does it do?

> Re Maria Damon's question about the cultural work of Hallmark cards – I
> learned what was to me a revelation about this a few years ago when I
> came to understand that for some folks I met through doing martial arts
> who are not verbally articulate in any way, hallmark cards – and popular
> songs on the radio – are significant speech. One fellow, in particular,
> would get enormously upset if he felt that the new hit of each week
> wasn't expressive of his own perspective, thoughts, and feelings – like
> they'd "gotten it wrong" This fellow and others used the songs and
> the cards to speak FOR them, felt intimately connected with them, etc.
> Sandra Braman

in relation to this, there's a scene in the movie Chicks in White Satin, which I didn't see but heard quite a bit about, and which is about the marriage of two women, a "trite" greeting card becomes a focal point of emotion, and, said the friend describing the scene to me, what would otherwise have been laughable became quite transcendently moving and convincingly "authentic." what made the card a conveyor of "authentic" feeling, i believe, was the women's reaction to it –their feelings. these are the kinds of saturated moments that compel my attention. so thanks for your comments above about your acquaintances who you identify as not verbally oriented –can you say more about how their feelings of identification, of being spoken for, were conveyed? if they were convincing to you, what was it that convinced you? the vehemence of your martial arts colleagues' expression? the astuteness of their analyses?

From: Sandra Braman

Subject: Re: what does it do?

Maria Damon asks what was so convincing about those folks who used hallmark cards and popular songs as their own expression – These folks in general had their intelligence largely in their bodies – the one fellow in particular looked like Baryshnikov when he moved – more than in their brains, so to speak, so it sure wasn't astuteness of analysis.... I was convinced I guess because of these things:

- constancy of attention to and use of popular songs and cards over time as a means of expression
- some anxiety each week waiting to see what the hits were on the radio, and discussion as soon as they were known as to their accuracy and appropriateness. when songs weren't appropriate, genuine gut level concern and response – stomping about, going over and over what was wrong, etcetera – really upset
- in thinking back, one manifestation that should seem particularly familiar to poets – a fair amount of time spent trying to copy out greetings or write down words to songs in a way that had to be accurate from beginning to end – one mistake and the paper is crumpled, have to try again
- incorporation of words from cards and songs into daily speech, and some dependence upon those sources of words, which constituted a fair percentage of language used in either oral or written forms

Ultimately I understood that while these folks had all the same emotions as we, they had no original means of verbalizing those emotions and thus relied entirely on the language of mass culture as exhibited particularly in these 2 forms, resulting in a complete identification with mass culture. I've come to understand language use on a spectrum of originality, with poets at one extreme attempting always first speech, and folks such as these at the other extreme, completely mapped onto the most mass of mass culture, with varying degrees of embeddedness in the culture in-between. Academic writing, it seems to me, is writing engaged always in the process of attempting to bring new ideas – now make sure not too many at one time, or too original – into embeddedness

in the culture through coercion of language use into one might say dogmatic forms.

The impact of exposure to these folks – and let me emphasize this is of course not everyone involved in martial arts, but a particular group I encountered in a particular place at a particular time (St. Cloud, Minnesota, mid-1980s) – certainly I've met many, many other folks involved in martial arts of one form or another who are extremely articulate. In fact, I think Daphne Marlatt was the first person to talk to me about Tai Chi, which is what I was studying.... – anyhow the impact on me of exposure to these folks was to have a completely different appreciation of the role of mass culture. And I have the sneaking suspicion that there are more folks like the ones I'm talking about than there are folks like "us"....

When I say St. Cloud I should also point out that the folks there came actually from all over the country; the one fellow in particular from rural upstate New York. We were all gathered around a brilliant master, the fellow who brought tai chi to this country, Master T. T. Liang, who was then in his late 80s.... and I hear is still teaching, now in Minneapolis, those of you who are there....

From: Steve Shoemaker

Subject: what does it do?

Maria Damon writes:

I'm interested in this recurring formula, the hallmark-card verse, invoked as anathema to all serious modernist/postmodernist sensibilities. when i ask students to research "micro-poetries," i include greetingcard verse as an example of a micro-poetry. how can these despised, commercial fragments –or the paradigm of poetry-as-therapy, as in psychiatric-ward workshops –be understood in terms of the "cultural work" they perform? rather than dismissing them out of hand as trite and derivative, how can we use them to understand, as shoemaker suggests, the multiple "purposes" of poetry.

I think you're right, Maria, that this kind of poetry can do useful cultural work. And also right that my schematic formulation risks a too easy dismissal of that work and participates in a history of such dismissals, which have, importantly, often been strongly gendered (e.g. Pound and "Amygism"). But what i was objecting to was not the existence of this kind of poetry or its uses, but the dominance of that sort of definition of poetry in mainstream culture. That dominance often precludes "serious" considerations of other sorts of poetry (i guess we shld watch out for too exclusive definitions all along the spectrum). There are, for ex., always some, often many, students who, with the poetry-as-personal-expression model in place, initially resist any in-depth consideration of the form of the poetry, on the assumption that such considerations are too ingenious, too self-conscious, not-what-the-author-was-thinking- about. It's that sort of reductive approach to poetry that i often find myself needing to work to move beyond by suggesting other goals and possibilities. This movement "beyond" usually involves some intensive "close reading," but a larger sense of other possibilities-for-poetry seems to be necessary for such reading to take place....

From: Kali Tal

Subject: Re: what does it do?

Maria Damon (hey, are you the Maria Damon who wrote "MIAs and the Body Politic?") asks how can

- > the paradigm of poetry-as-therapy, as in psychiatric-ward workshops
- > –be understood in terms of the "cultural work" they perform? rather
- > than dismissing them out of hand as trite and derivative, how can we
- > use them to understand, shoemaker suggests, the multiple "purposes"
- > of poetry.–maria d

And Ryan Knighton notes:

- > The value of these forms of writing goes beyond, perhaps, poetry.
- > Grice, for example, used psychiatric-ward writings and taped dis-
- > cussions in his research. This research yielded the expansion and
- > adaptation of Kantian maxims to discourse analysis (i.e. the
- > Cooperative Principles of "relevance", "cohesion", "manner", etc...).
- > His findings are very political insofar as they disclose another
- > relationship between power and language (i.e. rights of passage
- > into discursive communities).

I am preoccupied with these questions, working, as I do, primarily with soldier poets and other authors of what I call "literature of trauma." In my forthcoming book, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge, October 1995), I spend a lot of time making connections between poetry and power, therapy and politics. I've done a lengthy study of the work of poet W.D. Ehrhart (probably almost unknown in this crowd), who is one of the most

prolific of the Viet Nam veteran poets and who has also, by his editorial efforts and grand collegiality, made it possible for a generation of Viet Nam veteran poets to flourish. The poetry of these veterans is inseparable from their politics, from their strong antiwar stance, from their rage at stupid death and needless destruction; the best of them match Sassoon and Owen and Jarrell and all the other veteran poets who get so little play these days. The same organization (Vietnam Veterans Against the War) which acted as a catalyst for Viet Nam veteran writing was also the birthplace of veterans' "consciousness-raising" groups—a politicized form of therapy in which the power relation of the therapist and the veterans was deliberately restructured so that all were equal participants in the process of political growth and concomitant healing. It must be emphasized, though, that the healing was believed to come out of political action and that artistic work was political work. The first anthologies of Viet Nam Veteran writing (Free Fire Zone and Hearts and Minds) were published by activist poets as basement editions. Hearts was published by First Casualty Press, and all three founders are still working as poets and writers today: Wayne Karlin, Basil Paquet and Larry Rottmann.

But the invisibility of these poets in the academy is an interesting problem. Of the Viet Nam vet poets, only John Balaban, Bruce Weigl and Yusef Komunyakaa have received much praise in literary academic circles and these three are probably among the least activist of Viet Nam vet poets (though they are all unabashedly antiwar and "political") and (unsurprisingly) more connected to the writing workshop circles. Those few academics familiar with the field, however, are just as likely to value the work of Ehrhart or Gerald McCarthy, Horace Coleman, D.F. Brown, Jan Barry, Basil Paquet, or Leroy Quintana, and/or the related work of Viet Nam vet "cowboy poets" Rod McQueary and Bill Shields. (Did you know that cowboy poetry readings in the west can draw crowds of thousands?) There are a couple of "pop" Viet Nam war poets, like Steve Mason, who have done well on the trade market, but Ehrhart, for example, has a hard time getting publishers for his poetry although the critics who write about Viet Nam war literature write well of him. (For a good summary of this field of poetry, check out Vince Gotera's *Radical Visions* [Univ of GA Press, 1994].)

I would not, of course, put "Hallmark poetry" and "poetry-as-therapy" in the same class. It's my guess that most poets find the writing of poetry "therapeutic," and that the confessional/testimonial impulse is at the heart of a great deal of the poetry we read. It makes sense to me that some folks who have experienced trauma (like some Viet Nam combat veterans, rape and incest survivors, and Holocaust survivors) have a passionate commitment to convey

their experience in a potent form—to make, quite literally, world-changing fictions/poems. There is "Hallmark" confessional poetry (in which class I'd put Steve Mason, for example), and then there is the work of skilled craftsmen like Ehrhart or Quintana (who is best known as a "Southwestern/Chicano poet"), which equals in power and beauty the work of any of the "best" poets of the day. Somehow, though, these survivor-poets are rarely fashionable, tend not to be studied in the academy, or anthologized regularly. (Who reads Primo Levi's poetry now?) I'd argue that they're buried specifically because they are political, because their work forces us to confront events-in-the-world and allows no retreat, no relief.

From: Maria Damon

Subject: Re: what does it do?

Tony Green points out the problems with the "they who use pop and Hallmark" as against "we who could once use Wallace Stevens but who now have learned to use Gertrude Stein etc etc" model of critical inquiry. I agree. I'm uncomfortable with we/theys that imply either monolithic wes & theys or dichotomized wes vs. theys. i love pop songs as i suspect most of the ultra-groovoids on this list do, or have done. "originality" is not the sole purview of modernist poets, though it's their rallying cry. i hesitate to get into this turf here, but i think academic people who are passionate about poetry can only gain by expanding their embrace of other people's definitions of poetry. Isn't the person who waits anxiously to find out what the pop hits were, or copies greeting card verse into a notebook, just as passionate about poetry as someone who peruses Pound for hours on end to grok his prosodic mastery? –as someone who, until my book came out, thought i was a "cultural studies person" with a private love of poetry and now has a public/professional profile as a "poetry person" with a cultural studies orientation, I feel caught between two discourse communities when previously I didn't personally experience any discontinuity between them.

From: Tom Mandel

Subject: Re: Consent of the governing

Ron's response on the subject of "power", tenure, whatever, in wch he details his own experience, seems definitive. Truly, I hope this subject will go away, as it is boring beyond bearing.

A measure of worthwhile subject surely must be the difference which may be made by one response or another. Why, in that case, does this list produce the opposite when it is composed of intelligent and passionate people committed to the baseline language art?

I had a (seeming) endless correspondence more or less on this subject in the late 80's or very early 90's with Spencer Selby who at that time maintained as he seems to wish to continue to maintain that the poetry world is nominalist; i.e. people build magazines, booklists, reading series, etc. around names rather than works. And that this translates into a kind of power and status which is not an exact mathematical function of the value of the work currently streaming (dribbling?) from that source.

So? Yes, this is true. For one thing, most judgments about current work have little value in relation to any long-term assessment. The Cambridge Platonists were the hottest thing going hundreds of years ago, rather in the way that "theory" functions now. Read'em lately? For another, it's useless to think about poets in so immediate a manner. Your work is a lifelong arc (well, a much more complex shape than that); its weaknesses, lapses, gaps may contribute to strength.

Neglect, lack of official endorsement, surely these are relative; surely too they are a just reward for the restless and radical desire to write. To imagine that there is a locus of power relevant to writing that exists outside the authority of that desire, which is self-permitted and demanded, is a foolish illusion. Knock long enough at the door of the one place which you imagine it matters to be published (i.e. Conjunctions, Sulfur) and no doubt you will be let in and learn that the place and object associated with idea and work are strictly irrelevant. Must it not be the case that the energy invested in imagining the opposite cd be better invested in re-imagining one's work? Isn't there, for every one of us, someone who imagines that we have more power than they? Someone I think is powerful, another who thinks me so; someone Gary Sullivan imagines to have

more power than he and than is just (I pick Gary as a random example, not singling him out), and another who thinks that publisher-poet GS is a figure of the power position that this other has not attained?

I studied for years with Hannah Arendt; the two most important things she taught me were 1) a social/political issue must not be confused with one that is individual – one's own sense of marginality is irrelevant to the issue of how an institution like poetry marginalizes its participants. The other... well, this has been a bit stentorian, so I'll reveal the third thing Hannah Arendt taught me, and this involves a story.

For a quarter a small group of students did an intense reading course with Arendt on 2 works of Marx and Hegel. We worked very hard, and apparently we were good students, as she said near the end of the course that she wanted to reward our work by taking us out to lunch at the Quadrangle club, the faculty club at the U. of Chicago. It seemed to us, none of whom had been in this sanctum sanctorum (save, perhaps, one or 2 of us who bused tables there – as I did with Paul Butterfield, but that's another story), that this must signal our true arrival as intellectuals.

The day arrived for our lunch, and we sat at an oblong table; Hannah was at one end, and I had grabbed the other. "Miss Arendt, Miss Arendt," I cried out – earnest young intellect looking for arrival and power that I was – "let me order the wine; I've been reading some books about wine."

Hannah dissolved in laughter; "Tzome tzings (one wd have to have heard her rolling guttural penetrating voice to appreciate this I fear), Tohm, tzome tzing we do not learn from books!"

That was the most important lesson she taught me. The same to you.

From: Colleen Lookingbill

Subject: Re: Consent of the governing

Went to a reading/publishing party for a good new little magazine called Antonym on Sat. and was struck by what the editor Steve Carll had to say in his statement of introduction called "Humanity and Politics":

"No longer merely mediating, politics determines how people will stand with regard to each other.

Today, politics governs more and more the relations between people, as more and more people become afraid to commit themselves to the attempt at genuine communication, concern and compassion, which all involve listening. To listen is to stand within another's speaking, to move one's viewpoint into the perspective of another, to share experiences. Instead politics provides an easy interpretive grid that allows us to get a handle on people, to identify "where someone is coming from" without having to actually deal with the reality s/he experiences, without having to engage that person's speaking, without having to "expend" or "invest" one's energy actually communicating without the incentive of gain.

As politics (which involves the communication of only power relationships between people) holds more sway, humanity is more and more buried by reductive modes of relating, with it buried, politics becomes more and more mean-spirited, if indeed spirit of any kind can be said to be involved."

This is taken from the middle of a three page essay, but the point is that others in the poetics field find the power and politics discussion a fertile field --why the impulse to suppress it on this list?

From: Hank Lazer

Subject: Re: teaching

There have been, of late, several comments related to issues of teaching poetry. As I prepare for a course this Fall in Modern American Poetry, I've found myself thinking over a few similar issues.

First, I agree with those who have argued for reading aloud in class. Of course. Over the years, I have collected a good many audio and video tapes. I read aloud in class; the students read aloud in class (and, presumably, at home). And I am able to present in class a reading of poems by the poet. (And, at times, point out that the poet has often read a poem aloud, over time, in different ways.)

Second issue is, for me, a practical one. Any recommendations for how to present Zukofsky? I have about two weeks set aside, and cost of books is an issue. If you were to pick a few things by Z to teach (to graduate students—most in the MFA program, most of whom will have read nothing by Z, virtually nothing by Stein or Williams, probably familiar with Eliot, passing acquaintance maybe with Pound) what would you teach?

Third is a perhaps apocryphal story about Robert Duncan. I heard the story nearly 25 years ago, and it concerned the way Duncan allegedly began a poetry (poetry writing?) class at UC Santa Cruz. He said that there would be two basic rules in the course: 1) they would not be discussing students' poetry in class; 2) he would do almost all of the talking. When I first heard the story, I thought, what an arrogant asshole. I had begun to take a few writing workshops, and thought ill of Duncan's anti-democratic rules. Over the years, I can see what he may have been doing. The workshop methodology has indeed proven to be trivial and narrow—a kind of auto repair approach to tinkering with the unambitious and tidy poem. And the students will inevitably form their most important associations (for discussing poems too) outside of class among themselves. Duncan could certainly meet individually with students to talk over their poems. And needless to say, he did have a lot to say.

Fourth has to do with the issue that Rod Smith raised about the importance of teaching via not-knowing. I offer the following excerpt from Bob Perelman's fine book *The Trouble with Genius* (p. 165):

But her [Stein's] account of first being invited to teach is revealing. The invitation was the result of an angry blowup upon meeting Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler of the University of Chicago. This is the only place I can recall in her work where she represents herself as losing control. Adler's list of "all the ideas that had been important in the world's history" causes Stein first to get "excited" and then "violent" (EA, 205-7). She is invited to teach Adler's class the next week, where, predictably, she triumphs. Afterward she explains to Hutchins: "You see why they talk to me is that I am like them I do not know the answer, you you say you do not know but you do know if you did not know the answer you could not spend your life in teaching but I I really do not know ... that is the trouble with governments and Utopia and teaching, the things not that can be learnt but that can be taught are not interesting" (EA, 213).

I'd be very curious to hear how others go about basing their teaching on what they don't know. Or how various ones of you balance teaching between an orientation toward a "delivery" of what you know and a shared exploration of what you don't know. Personally, I hope that Stein is wrong. It is, I hope, possible to sustain a career in teaching precisely by basing that activity in a substantial amount of not knowing. (Though such an approach has a great capacity to annoy and baffle some students.) If not—if Stein's right—my career's about over....

From: Abby Coykendall

Subject: doing the one-two writing/teaching

Two questions lately posed to this list seem inextricably intertwined: That of "whence writing comes" [an apparent mystery] & that of "how to teach from ignorance" [an apparent absurdity]. To begin with the second, by way of implicitly talking of the first, Marx comes in handy. In "Contribution to Critique," he configures a certain kind of critic, one who "PRACTICALLY interests a large party" by not "confronting the world dogmatically with a new principle: 'Here is the Truth, kneel before it,' but instead by "developing new principles for the world out of principles of the world."

[when writing, this world is writing. and despite the language, this need not be a tauntology. and, by the by, experience finds its way in both these worlds, too]

When teaching, I also find that what I have least mastered is precisely that which comes in most handy. I especially like taking the transparent, ignorable, everyday as the place to most incite suspicion, or critique. And by using everyday materials (e.g. pop culture), it is most easy to interest a large party, one as conflictually heterogeneous as possible.

Teaching [writing] is an extreme battle over the modes of cultural recognition, and as such, marks "humanity's" very problematic, and entangled, relation to temporality. As Walter Benjamin remarks in One Way Street:

"The mastery of nature, so imperialists teach, is the purpose of all technology. But who would trust a cane-wielder who proclaimed the mastery of children to be the purpose of education? Is not education above all the indespendible ordering of the relationship between generations and therefore mastery, if we are to use that term, of that relationship and not of children? and likewise technology is not the mastery of nature but of the relation of nature and man."

The subject of mastery, that upon which it WORKS, is not isolated to those "natures" supposedly distinct from "man" (or, metaphorically, the student). The subject of mastery is in fact the recognition (or non-recognition) of the irreparably entangled, and mutually constituting, relation between both. Thus, pedagogy's site of control and co-ordination, that upon which its power is exerted, is not that which it ostensibly addresses—students—but instead generational recognition itself—the continuity and contiguity of what is

recognized as "man." In the cane-weilding case, mastery is "man's" attempt to (re)member "himself" as self-same, as owning or possessing what is seen as "his" "nature." The drive to order is a drive both to map a field of recognition and a drive to mask the interlocked relations of these multifarious natures. Paradoxically, or perhaps not too surprisingly, this supposed mastery steps in precisely where these relations are beyond a controllable play of recognition.

[and I would add: the word "soul" is a dangerous way to step in for precisely where the relations of sender/addressee, me/I, spirit/text is beyond a controllable play of recognition, that in fact to designate them as such, is to suture what is essentially problematic & conflictual about these relations, and to likewise suture the "drive to writing" itself]

Marketing strategies to Web Poetry

From: Maria Damon

Subject: Re: "marketing strategies"

rachel writes:

> It seems to me that theory, not form, is the real marketing strategy, in
> literature at least. In science a theory is used to test a hypothesis, but in
> literature theory is used, far too often, to carry a whole school of writ-
> ers—the bad along with the good—into prominence. It is used as an
> excuse to stop thinking, to stop reading widely, to circle the wagons. It
> is, essentially, fear, in an intellectual form. Rather than testing a
> hypothesis, and breaking new ground, theory in literary hands seems to
> be used as an instrument of enforcement, prescribing the sorts of
> poems (or fictions or whatever) which are to be written.

rachel, it seems to me that anything can be used this way becuz face it, academia is not full of original, intellectually adventurous sorts, and categorization can be used as intellectual shorthand for not dealing with ideas. "theory" is, i think, just a word, when u think of, say, the differences between lacan, deleuze and stuart hall, it seems incongruous that the same word is used to either fetishize or dismiss them. but i agree that labels and categories more often stultify than enable thinking and engagement. i never read the "objectivists" before this summer, when i saw carl rakosi read at naropa and was captivated, because i was put off by the category and terminology of "objectivist" —i thought one had to be really smart to read them, so i never did.

From: Alfred Corn (forwarded by Susan Schultz)

Subject: Marketing strategies

I was interested by a post forwarded to me about "marketing strategies" for concurrent poetic styles, which leads to the following connected series of questions:

- (1) Is the purpose of the POETICS list to have a go at changing subscribers' thinking on questions of poetics, or simply to send a message pleasing to the speaker even if not designed or destined to change anyone's thinking?
- (2) If the latter, then why not just skip the list and send it to oneself alone?
- (3) If the purpose is to change subscribers' thinking, then why not present the sender's thinking on a particular style or poetry?
- (4) Given how revealing metaphors are, which of the following metaphors best describes the process of changing the thinking of another person?
 - a. The lighting of one candle from another.
 - b. Selling, and the marketing strategies behind selling.
 - c. Infection—the propagation of a microbe or virus.
 - d. Coercion, the marshaling of intellectual troops to enforce correct thinking.
 - e. Seduction—attraction, effective endearments and caresses, leading to surrender.
 - f. Inebriation—conveyance of intellectual substances which erode resistance or blur argument.
 - g. Terrorism—dropping a bomb and taking advantage of the resulting fear and confusion to assume control.
 - h. A sermon leading to conversion
 - i. The banquet—setting out a dinner and declaring "Open House."

(5) Are there other metaphors that describe the process?

(6) Have there been instances of subscribers' changing their thinking on the basis of posts on POETICS? If so, how did it happen?

From: Ron Silliman

Subject: Value in Poetry

The question of a "bad" poet or poem in the "parallel tradition," to borrow Corn's vocabulary, really calls up the question of value, which is what I think Bob [Perelman] addresses in [The Trouble with Genius]. While Pound and Stein make pretty explicit claims for their genius (and Joyce was certainly willing to play the part, tho more cautious in his statements), Zukofsky seems to have been far more defensive about the issue, and ultimately does not stake his work on that. What I think Bob is after is a fresh rereading of all 4 that (1) reads them beyond the transcendentalist heuristics of their ardent fans, who see only glimmers of revealed knowledge (they're not alone in this sycophantic reaction: Spicer, Kerouac and others have all called it forth. Even Merwin gets it for heaven's sake) and (2) looks at what it may be in their own writing that calls forth such nonsense as Kenner, Davenport and Terrell have spewed forth. A very distinct critical problem from the one put forth, say, by the New Critics, who shunned that fawning stance in favor of ultraprofessionalism. Where Bob gets in trouble, and it's minor quibbling on my part to call it that (but to put on the title as much as anything), is in not being focused at all points on which is the target of a given reading. So in that sense he tries to do too much, which oddly replicates what all 4 of those poets do in their masterworks.

I don't, by the way, think Bob is announcing himself Pro-Stevens over any of those four (give me that cite, Chris!), tho if you look at the recent work (in Riddle Moon or the chapbook that Ben Friedlander did, Chaim Soutine, the degree to which Bob is primarily a social satirist (as is Charles B) really comes to the fore. It's an interesting genre to see get such large play and worth noting that both Bob and Charles have generally stayed away from anything of "epic" proportions.

The problem of value for my generation is I think sticky. Certainly value exists, but it is not a fixed, transcendental term in my world and that relativism is what drives the Bob Doles of poetry (and the Ross Perots of poetry, too) around the bend. Any one of us could name a poet, or several, whose work we do not connect with, because it shares little in the way of our own values. ... I'm sure that I fit into this same role for other readers too, and that's how the world ends up with surplus values that cause slippage and surprises for us all. Which is why the poetry of 20 years from now won't look the way I expect (or hope or fear) it might, nor the way you imagine either.

But I do think that our parallel tradition (quote unquote) adheres and evolves in interesting, positive ways because there is a broader range of shared values, some Venn diagram of which would put myself, Susan Howe, John Taggart, Larry Fagin, Antler and Joy Harjo all into the same circle. And this is what makes discourse possible.

The problem is one of knowing where, at any given moment, to put the emphasis.

From: Alan Golding

Subject: Howe Now, Brown Formalist (and Bob Perelman too)

One challenge of being hooked up to the Poetics Digest option involves trying to respond to six messages at once instead of just hitting the reply key. But here goes.

While I'm not sure that Susan Howe needs me to come to her defense as she lies there swooning on her fainting couch (poetry is like a swoon, y' know, with this difference ... the Klupzy Girl said), but I don't mind doing so, because I love her work. But I also appreciate Ron going out on a limb with his original comment; the question came up of poets whom one does not especially warm to within one's own alleged tradition, and Ron was willing to name names. I find Susan's work very compelling in the very terms that Ron finds it tepid, on the page—that is, in terms of her wonderful ear and her visual design of a page—that is, I like it, among other reasons, for the aural and material values that Ron finds lacking, if I understand him right. The other point on which I diverge from you, Ron (and I'd like to hear more from you if you're willing/interested), has to do with your assertion that the value/interest of Howe's work lies in extra-textual concerns. ("Extra-paginal?" This also sounds oddly close to that old New Critical *bete noire*, the "extra-literary.") I'm surprised that someone who's always been so attuned to the social components of writing, reading, and reception as you have should use as the basis of your critique what sounds like a dismissal of or skepticism toward those same social components. Perhaps I'm misunderstanding something in your comments.

The larger issue, though, has to do with the differences within a movement that underlie the public constructions (usually, though not always, by "outsiders") of that movement's homogeneity. To me this is more interesting than questions of who likes or doesn't like whose work. The value of Ron's post on Howe is that it points up the inevitable fissures within so-called "so-called Language writing," fissures that were probably always present but that tend to come to the surface later rather than sooner. This is one interesting and instructive part of Bob P's *Language Writing and Literary History* book, which I've read in manuscript: he discusses internal difference ("where the meanings are," remember) within LP, asking some very fundamental skeptical questions about some of the work of, say, Bruce Andrews and (in the essay that Keith Tuma mentioned) Charles B. So I don't read Bob's book as a "bunking" of LP after some kind of Bloominan "debunking" of his modernist predecessors; it operates

with a rather more complex sense of literary and personal history than that, so that while it's partly involved with bunking (I like that term, Chris), it's also attentive to points of difference, disagreement, and to the bringing together of strange bedfellows (O'Hara and Barthes). But enough on a book that is not yet a book, that no-one's read.

I have to agree with Marjorie on *The Trouble with Genius*. As I read it, the four writers engage Perelman precisely because of the conflicting impulses within their work; the internal contradictions are generative, not "problems" or "weaknesses." Just like the internal contradictions within a poetic "movement." And that connects (I hope!) with what Tom Kirby-Smith said about the New Formalists. Granted, Tom, that like any movement the NF is much less homogeneous than it might first appear. But remember too that this was not a label that some evil critic stuck on all these innocent diverse writers who were just sitting out doing their thing. This is a self-consciously self-constituted group; even though some people might resist the label, lack any sense of group identification, or have lost it later (as you suggest Tim Steele has), the fact is that a group of writers (predominantly male, as seems nearly always usual) with shared concerns agreed to present themselves as a group, a movement, and set out to produce polemics and manifestoes designed to represent and further their work and interests. In the mid-late '80s they even explicitly talked about themselves as an alternative avant-garde to LP. This is my sense of the history, anyway. Am I way off? Names associated with the movement in these formative stages would include Frederick Turner, Frederick Feirstein, Robert McDowell, Dick Allen, Dana Gioia, just to mention the main polemicists (editors of essay collections, editors of special issues of mags., writers of manifestoes). And from a pretty early stage, fellow travellers would include Robert McPhillips, Brad Leithauser, Mary Jo Salter, Molly Peacock, Timothy Steele, Charles Martin, Paul Lake, Mark Jarman, Gertrude Schnackenberg. A diverse group geographically, professionally, and in other ways, but they did constitute themselves in print as a group with identifiable (and self-identified) concerns. Differences—those too. I hear that Dana Gioia is putting together a NF anthology that does not include Dick Allen, a founder member. A bit like an LP anthology without Silliman, Bernstein, Watten, Andrews, or whomever.

One more thought on Susan Howe. I have no desire whatever to resurrect the soul/spirit thread: but surely ("surely") one reason that the Apex of the M-ers take Howe and John Taggart as models is that there's a strong sense of the spiritual (however unconventionally defined) in both writers, and that this is one point of difference between them and many so-called so-called so-called

so-called so-called Language writers. And no, I'm not going to try and define "spiritual."

David Bromige writes that the most charged points for him in reading even writers that he cares about are those points "where interest and disaffection war" in his reading. This seems to me a good summary of how Bob approaches the writers in *Trouble with Genius*....

From: Maria Damon

Subject: Good and Bad?

hello alfred corn –i've posted several times to poetics to the effect that i take fairly seriously Robert Duncan's dictum that there are no good or bad poems. this i hold true for just about every "school" of poetry. i wd not teach a class in poetry by offering, for example, a "good" and "bad" example from each "school." it's an intriguing idea, but it's simply never crossed my mind. even after thinking it over, it strikes me that to learn to evaluate a product is somewhat like backing into a process backasswards as it were, no disrespect intended, but to start from a position of judgment is not, i think, the most effective way to open someone's mind. it shuts down process, and leaps to a critical appraisal of product –how intimidating to someone trying to learn to read or practice. maybe i'm a sentimental patsy, but openness, to me, is always a better approach to learning. rather than asking for an example of a "bad" language poet, why not ask us how, for instance, we would "read" a given text? too bad you missed gary sullivan –he posted some stunning close readings of initially opaque texts that were useful paradidms for learning to read. and they didn't involve ranking poetry, poems and poets in a meritocratic economy. respectfully–md

From: Keith Tuma

Subject: Ghost Corner

I was prepared to contest the premises of Alfred Corn's questions regarding criteria and evaluation—just as others (myself included) had seen fit to question a rhetorical model where one post can "change a mind" and perhaps also the idea that metaphors are "revealing." But I think that David Kellogg and Maria Damon have already done that—and on the contested nature of criteria one might refer to Barbara H. Smith's *The Contingencies of Value*. If Corn has recently become a kind of ghost on this list, he seems to me a friendly ghost, and I want to say a few things in his defense. It seems to me that there is a need in the "experimental" poetry community for direct and detailed statements of "personal" value and preferences, tastes (not that these need be singular or static). Perhaps because of the way langpo emerged and the climate it emerged in, much langpo prose has been given over to the criticism of other prevailing modes of poetry—the so-called "mainstream"—or to a kind of blanket advocacy where the names of the elect are rehearsed. Or, in some cases, for political and "theoretical" reasons, evaluation is itself questioned or rejected—Charles B, for one, sometimes seems to me given to listing rather than explaining his preferences, and I don't doubt for a second that he has reasons. But there has been comparatively little critical prose by langpo writers not directed primarily at "others"—at least until recently, as the case of Bob Perelman's book(s) demonstrates, along with Ron Silliman's recent remark about Susan Howe. This makes perfect sense to me: one must first clear a little space, no? (This was part of Alan Golding's point.) Were things any different in, say, Robert Pinsky's *The Situation of Poetry*, where he worked to clear space for Frank Bidart, Jim McMichael and others? But it seems to me that now IS the time for the langpo crowd to begin working on their own *A Test of Poetry* and, ideally, the range of their attention will be at least as expansive as Zukofsky's. This is not just a matter of expanding an audience but of clarifying what might be meant by surprise, striking sound patterns, engagement with history—etc etc (Kellogg's list could of course be expanded a good deal)—in a proliferation of examples arranged in provocative juxtaposition. Such examples need not be ranked good and bad and—if it's possible to be open-minded at least a little—the commentary might follow the examples. Of course finding publishers for such books—there should be a good number of them—will be difficult, which probably brings us back to the point where what used to be a "movement" (langpo) started.

From: Alfred Corn

Subject: Criteria

I know that individual posts do not necessarily reflect the views of all subscribers or represent a fair sampling of the thinking of LANGUAGE poets in general. So I'm going to continue on with an open mind and assume that answers to the questions I asked could be better put than some of those posted these past few days. Keith Tuma made sense; he thought about what he was writing before just lashing out. There are no doubt others who can do this, which I'll continue believing until evidence proves otherwise.

To begin with, one small point: I didn't say posts were designed to change people's minds but instead their thinking. Why be a LANGUAGE, or any sort of poet if you're not sensitive to language? And if you have no interest in changing someone's thinking, why not just send the post to yourself and enjoy the sound of your own voice?

On the possibility or impossibility of evaluating poetry: The idea that all poems are of equal interest, that no poem is either good or bad, can be believed by some people, obviously, but not by most readers. Check your own experience: when you sit down with a new magazine of poetry, do you really begin at the beginning and in perfect calm read each poem with equal interest, enjoying, learning and feeling in equal measure on every page, regardless of what happens there? If you do, you will be an Editor's Delight, the ideal subscriber, who will never dislike any of the offerings. Is this actually how you read? Or do you not abandon some poems in entire boredom, go on to others, reread some with pleasure and fascination, dismiss others with a chuckle, etc.? Be honest.

By the same token, if evaluation is as contingent as some of the posts say it is, how is LP able to dismiss "mainstream" poetry as dull or retrograde or clunky or whatever? Isn't that an evaluation? If it is, on what basis is the dismissal made? What are your standards? When David Kellogg cites all the usual criteria that have been applied to the evaluation of poetry since Day One, I have to ask him why he doesn't read the "mainstream" poetry that has those qualities in abundance. Obviously there are other restrictions he is bringing to his evaluation that he doesn't mention—like (I'm just guessing) "communication forms drawn from ordinary conversational practice or logical discourse are excluded," or something like that. Whatever they are, these extra criteria, the

ones that distinguish LP from "mainstream," ought to be describable, and that's what I'd like to hear, provided the describer can communicate clearly.

My own experience: I have read in LP magazines and didn't get anything out of them. I also read some essays in a collection about the movement. They didn't sound convincing. It's only because of Ron Silliman's postings on CAP-L that I looked into the question again. In an interesting post made some six months ago, he asserted that the LP movement was in the process of splintering into multiple sub-groups who no longer shared the same aesthetic bases, and that, in effect, these groups could no longer "read" each other. I would be curious to hear whether other Langpoets agree that this is true; and, if so, what are the differences that make it impossible to care about the writings of other splinter groups? I hope that no one is going to say it is altogether impossible to discuss the ideas on which poetry or poetries are based. If so, why subscribe to a discussion group, and why claim a place in the universe of discourse?

On the question of "music," shouldn't we admit that the sound techniques of actual music and verbal texts are too far removed from each other to make this metaphor at all useful? And if pure sound is all that matters in poetry, why hasn't the movement hailed Dame Edith Sitwell as one of its heroes?

A final question: are Laura Riding, Dylan Thomas, John Ashbery, Michael Palmer, Ann Lauterbach, and Jorie Graham LANGUAGE poets. On what basis do you determine whether someone is writing LP?

From: David Kellogg

Subject: Re: Criteria

Dear Alfred Corn,

Since you single out Keith Tuma as the one person who thought about what he was writing before lashing out, I'll assume that I'm one of the dunderheaded lashers who disappoint (DLWD). Nevertheless, I persist.

For everybody's sake, I'll only respond to the part of this post that addressed me, or that I think were more or less addressed to questions I've fielded before.

- > On the possibility or impossibility of evaluating poetry: The idea that
- > all poems are of equal interest, that no poem is either good or bad, can
- > be believed by some people, obviously, but not by most readers.

Yes. And nobody on this list said otherwise, not even maria; when she said that she agreed with Duncan about there being no good or bad poems that was NOT a refusal of evaluation, nor was it an "anything-goes" kind of policy.

Certainly nobody has said that all poems are of equal interest. "Interest" is precisely what is at issue, in the sense that our evaluations of poems are "interested" (read: contingent) and thus different. I am interested in some poetry because I like it; I'm interested in other poetry because I don't. I find boredom interesting, but boredom is usually thought of as "bad."

- > By the same token, if evaluation is as contingent as some of the
- > posts say it is, how is LP able to dismiss "mainstream" poetry as dull or
- > retrograde or clunky or whatever? Isn't that an evaluation? If it is, on
- > what basis is the dismissal made? What are your standards? When David
- > Kellogg cites all the usual criteria that have been applied to the
- > evaluation of poetry since Day One, I have to ask him why he doesn't read

- > the "mainstream" poetry that has those qualities in abundance. Obviously
- > there are other restrictions he is bringing to his evaluation that he
- > doesn't mention—like (I'm just guessing) "communication forms drawn from
- > ordinary conversational practice or logical discourse are excluded," or
- > something like that. Whatever they are, these extra criteria, the ones
- > that distinguish LP from "mainstream," ought to be describable, and that's
- > what I'd like to hear, provided the describer can communicate clearly.

I guess I have to respond here, since my name's mentioned, but let me state that I have NEVER done any of the following:

- a) dismissed mainstream poetry (tho I dismissed Tim Steele's prose—would you care to defend it, or describe him as "mainstream"?);
- b) said I don't read mainstream poetry (I do, in fact, even the occasional Alfred Corn, even Philip Larkin, tho I once called the latter "asinine");
- c) excluded any of the things he mentioned from my likings (ordinary conversational practice etc.)

In fact, poetry popularly described as LP (I won't quibble about terms here, about who is or isn't LP, I have no interest in that game, my own recent poetry learns from it but probably wouldn't be described as such) uses all of those things: ordinary conversational practice, logical discourse, etc. Sometimes its critical discourse has seemed to dismiss such elements, but that's the difference between the blanket of theory and the field of practice.

As for the dismissal of mainstream poetry by some language poets, I don't think it's more surprising than other critiques by excluded groups in other contexts, and a lot of times it's right. Just to take your own post for an example, one thing that pisses people off is the concept of a "mainstream" in the first place – something that, for most people who believe in the term, is best eaten reified. When, just to take an almost arbitrary example, J.D. McClatchy begins his Vintage book of contemporary American poetry by arguing that no camps need form because everybody already knows who the big ones are and then begins the book out of chronological order with LOWELL and BISHOP,

pushing Olson for example about ten poets down the line and representing him with a single poem – well, that's disgusting. There are I'm sure lots of specific examples of exclusion from the movement's early days that others on this list could tell you about.

However, it seems to me that the anger from LPs about mainstream poetry has toned down in recent years, and why? Partly because exclusionary tactics like McClatchy's are more recognizable for the strongarming they are, and partly because some wrongs are being righted (the new Norton postmodern etc.). The breakup that Ron mentioned I think is partly due to the fact that individual language poets are getting recognized, and that group identification is less attractive to leaders who are recognizable individually. (I'm not necessarily speaking of you, Ron; I'm thinking sociologically now.) Certainly Ron has advocated precisely the kind of more pluralistic reading that you seem to think language poetry excludes (see his "Canons and Institutions").

From my point of view it's you, and not me, who describes any liking of language poetry in exclusionary terms, like the way you assume that I don't read what you call "mainstream" poetry – a pretty galling and arrogant assumption, not to mention 100% wrong. I don't need to exclude anybody to describe my tastes. For example, my favorite poets among the language group are Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, and Leslie Scalapino (tho she's maybe not defined as "in" the group by everybody). These poets make use of prose, which I find interesting, and they've opened for me ways of thinking about the poetic process (or better, procedure?) that are pretty fresh for me. With Ron there's a sense of immediacy in the project at hand, something to be done, and a willingness not to exclude the seemingly anomalous or "ugly" material. So some stuff gets left seemingly hanging, but not "wasted," – or "waste" is reconceived in the process of the poem. My response to Hejinian is I guess pretty typical – *My Life* was a pivotal book for me, the work that made me think, hey, there's something going on here – and its virtues are more apparent each time I read it. Since everything I say about her has been said better somewhere else, I'll refrain. With Scalapino for me it's again a question of process, repetition, and – in her case especially – perspective. How a subject gets talked around, through, wrung out. Her work is exhausting, and saying "it's not for everybody" does not degrade its value for me and for many others.

My reasons for reading each of these poets is often different from my reasons for liking them, and may include political or research interests: these can be transpersonal, and I may find the work satisfying in these respects and worth promoting to others. I may even critique other poets as not meeting such needs

(politically indifferent, not worth writing a paper on, not likely to interest students). This is all due to my situatedness as an academic, my contingent (as an adjunct, highly ;-) contingent) position in the university and, beyond that, the world. I may also read other poets for other reasons. Who's to say? Me.

See? None of my reasons for liking any of these poets is based on an exclusion of conversation, logical discourse, etc. I'd appreciate it if you didn't assume wrong things about somebody you don't know for no reason other than his presence on a mailing list.

From: Keith Tuma

Subject: Re: Criteria

Well, the conversation is getting interesting and, damn, just when I have a thousand things to do—seminars to prepare, deadlines, self-imposed deadlines. So I'm not going to write the world's longest post on why I like to read poems by, uh, Bernadette Mayer, Ron Silliman, Jerome Rothenberg, Lorine Niedecker, Basil Bunting, Charles Bernstein, Michael Palmer, Cole Swensen, Sir Thomas Wyatt, Frank Bidart, Thomas Campion, Baudelaire, Villon, Catullus, Nathaniel Mackey, Nathaniel Tarn, Will Alexander, Robert Creeley, Leslie Scalapino, Elizabeth Bishop, Thom Gunn, Dr. Suess, Turner Cassity, Firdosi, Cid Corman, John Taggart, Clayton Eshleman, Homer, Horace, Dickinson, Susan Howe, John Skelton, Mina Loy, Amiri Baraka, Larry Eigner, Roy Fisher, Allen Fisher, Catherine Walsh, Maurice Scully, Gael Turnbull, Peter Redgrove, David Dabydeen, H. D., Wallace Stevens, Laura Riding, William Bronk, Paul Celan, Vallejo, Dante, Hugh Macdiarmid, Tom Raworth, Sappho, William Northcutt ... oh I'm already running out of gas. It's a big and glorious world: also crowded. And I don't think of myself as much of a poet, which might make a difference.

BUT, in the spirit of friendly dialogue, I would like to ask Alfred Corn—yes I've read two of your books, *A Various Light* and the book about NY—a question. Just don't seem fair that you get to ask all the questions. You mention that you have looked at langpo magazines and not been impressed and read a book of essays on langpo and not been convinced. I'm wondering what magazines and what critical book those were? And what put you off or didn't convince? That would clarify some things.

One final point: you seem to suggest that the only alternative to the model of discourse-as-persuasion is solipsistic blather. Can't agree.

It may be obvious, but who knows? So I'll say that just because a name isn't on that list above doesn't mean I don't read him/her with pleasure and just because it is doesn't mean I read all of his/her work with pleasure. Must be cautious with a ghost around and—hell—we also don't want to wake up all the lurkers.

Oh, and one more thing: Michael Palmer doesn't for the most part think of himself as a language poet, though the issue is complicated. See the interview

Lee Bartlett did with Palmer in the New Mexico book Talking Poetry. MP can speak for himself there.

From: Maria Damon

Subject: Re: Criteria

a coupla points

i never intended any of my responses to your queries to be vituperative or dismissive. i'm not "lashing out;" if i seem to be, that's my "style," as others on the list can attest; it has nothing to do with the topic.

i have never written on language poetry nor have a particular stake in its thriving or wilting. i'm on the list because i met charles bernstein at a conference and he offered to sign me up. i sd sure, great. i'd never been on a list before. ... so, in my particular case, the people who "reached out" to me are the people whose list i joined. i've felt welcome, though it's been clear during some interactions that i'm coming from a different place. i try to take to heart robert duncan's "no good or bad poetry," perhaps because as a fellow-traveler and sometime participant in all kinds of schools that stress relativity, from the pop-psych insistence on "I statements" ("I like this" rather than "this is good") to cultural studies's underlying ethos of cultural relativity (for inst., i prefer montaigne to most of his contemporaries, etc.)

anyway, those who are of the "personal experience is a bore, personal anecdotes are narcissistic and self-indulgent" persuasion (which cuts across ideological orientation, i've found) are probably dozing off by now, but i wanted to clarify one person's history w/ the POETICS list and reflections on your latest forward. come on down! (you can always use the DIGEST option)

From: Louis Cabri

Subject: poetry/prose thinking

The temporal axis of engagement on this listserv virtually guarantees that its corpus – the prose as much as the poetry – is collaboratively written, whether acknowledged, and to what degree, or not. I for one have purposely listened-up for that in posting to the poem. In fact I'd say that a lot of the poem has to do with how to reflexively acknowledge the collaborative nature of the listserv itself (and its concerns, and the reading horizons of its various non/participants, etc). So I am surprised at the unthinking tilt against the listserv's recent development, to wit: the ongoing, collaboratively written poem.

Up til now I've tried to engage with these prosaic prods by means of adding lines to versions of the poem. But how can this persistent antagonism toward the poetry be explained? What does it say about 'who' we are when we read, how we read/think, and what we are reading for (and all this in specific relation to the communal, processual address permitted by the listserv)? Is it really – it seems endemic to computer technology, complaints of how slow it is - the repeated lines that are irksome as some have politely said, or questions of lack of time, or is it more like a judgement on the quality of the 'slowed perception' that the lines require?

These questions are for the poetry contributors as well. What does this decision mean: of when and what to contribute to the poem, and what and when to contribute to the prose instead? The semantic content of the prose (e.g. reaching for facts about...) is in some ways accountable to/by the institutional/pedagogical context that implicitly lurks 'beneath' the listerv (viz. university addresses appended to contributor names).

Some of these questions, the way I've quickly sketched em, may seem to demand of contributors a 'self-inquiring' kind of response, but I do mean them to be read in more of an objective sense than that.

For subjectively speaking, I could evilly say more than the following about how I find the prose posts at their worst to be irredeemably complacent, inertial, phatic, self-regarding, vapidly 'spontaneous', substitute television – just as some of you no doubt could and have said and implied as much about your reading experience of the poetry. So in other words: this kind of judgement on quality ain't an interesting pursuit on these terms – and there

seems to be a general consensus on this. In any event, to go on as I have just done wouldn't explain why this antagonism exists in the first place, nor how to theorize it in a reflexive way as a means toward interpreting the nature of this listserv practice, and the potentials for both its poetry and its prose. As we know blah blah blah, the history of prose, in all its forms – and this evidently is no exception – is one of positioning itself as the natural communicative ideology, in comparison to poetry. This seems the case recently regardless of medium – so that, for instance, the poetry on the listserv is criticized for being "hard-copy," whereas there is no reflexive critique at all of the listserv prose as being equally – if not more – so. That's just one recent example of the agonism between the genres. Now there is a preference for debate across the boundary of the listerv itself (with a non-member) in prose, rather than beginning one between the thinking in prose and in poetry on the listserv itself. Expansionism, always the way. How can people interested in poetry not be interested in thinking in poetry especially in this listserv format? The common denominator prevails: it's the most conservative articulation that gets the attention: so there's a collective rallying of 'explaining to do' when the listserv is challenged by someone 'from outside'. While the listserv's decentred centre, the poem itself, performs its own variety of common excesses. This too long, but hey, only the letters in these words have repeated (some might find comfort in saying).

From: Keith Tuma

Subject: Re: Criteria

Dear Alfred Corn,

Probably if I had to name just two essays that might serve as a primer for someone coming late to the game they would be the title essay in Silliman's *The New Sentence* and Bernstein's "Artifice of Absorption" in *A Poetics*—neither of these really "about" langpo so much as concerned with elements and issues relevant to it. And there's CB's *Content's Dream* too, Perelman's edited collection *Writing/Talks*, Steve McCaffery's *North of Intention*, many of the essays in *Poetics Journal*, the now-defunct *Temblor*, Bernstein's collection *The Politics of Poetic Form*, books by Watten, Perloff, too many others really to mention with a lunch appointment in an hour. One partly skeptical but useful and too little known essay is Nathaniel Tarn's "Regarding the Issue of New Forms" in *Views From The Weaving Mountain*. Then there's near-famous exchanges between E. Weinberger and Michael Davidson in *Sulfur*, one of the journals I'd recommend, though by no means devoted to langpo, and between Charles Altieri and Jerome McGann in *Critical Inquiry*, which also once published an introductory essay by Lee Bartlett. That's just a start though.

Don't know if there are journals exclusively devoted to langpo—too diverse anymore to be worth characterizing—but a few of the journals I read where some might be found at times (and there are many I won't name—see the SPD catalog) are *Avec*, the defunct *O-blek*, Nate Mackey's *Hambone*, *O.ARS*, *Acts*. *The Difficulties* and *Temblor* had great runs and one should look at newer, not-necessarily and in some cases hostile-to-langpo journals such as *Apex of the M*, *Five Fingers* review, *lingo*, etc etc. Maybe somebody with more time than I have today can offer a fuller list, or perhaps refer you to some of the lists available on-line or elsewhere.

Yes, it's true that langpo is one of the places where I (sometimes) find interesting writing. But then what writing can ever really be isolated from other writing anyway? Surely not langpo, which sometimes has a parasitic/punning/ironic relationship to other writing. What would Mr. Silliman do, for instance, without the first line of Pound's *Cantos*?

If anything, I'm sorry to be so limited (short, brief) in the lists I'm making here, and the one I offered yesterday.

From: Alfred Corn

Subject: More Forwards

To the POETICS list:

To answer the question "Who the hell is this guy?" I guess I'm not quite satisfied with Ron Silliman's thumbnail biography. I've published six books of poetry and one book of criticism with Viking Penguin. The poetic line I belong to, insofar as it can be separated out from the general Western tradition begins with Whitman, goes through Crane and Stevens, on up through the poets discussed in David Kalstone's book about autobiographical poetry, titled *Five Temperaments*. The ones he talked about were Lowell, Bishop, Ashbery, Merrill, and Rich. I met Kalstone when I was just beginning to publish and he shaped my ideas about what poetry could do. I'd like to think I'd added something of my own to this poetic line, but it isn't my job to say whether I have. Silliman says I sometimes write about homosexuality for *The Nation*. I have no idea what he means unless he's referring to a review of the stories of Edmund White (a gay fiction writer) that is in the current issue. A few prizes have come to me for my poetry, but as the posts on this list amply demonstrate, I'm not especially well known, certainly less well known than, say, Lyn Hejinian. I teach as an adjunct in the Columbia MFA Program, but have done visiting stints at other places as well—UCLA, Yale, the U. of Cincinnati. Will this do as an intro?

To David Kellogg: No putdown intended. We were speaking at cross purposes. I thought you understood that what I was asking for was the aesthetic of LP, what makes it different from other approaches to writing poetry. The criteria you gave overlap with the ones I apply, so I felt frustrated in the wish to get a general introduction to the movement. Yes, I could just plunge in by myself, but I did that before and got nowhere. A critical guide can save years of wasted effort. Meanwhile I see that LP is only one kind of poetry that interests you, not the only. That sounds reasonable to me. What I had been bothered by was the foundational "exclusionary" line of argument I had heard elsewhere: that LP is the "real" poetry of our time and the future; in fact, one of the recent posts takes this position, dismissing the other approach as predictable and boring. (I had used the term "mainstream" before because some of POETICS's posters did.)

It begins to sound like the POETICS list is quite varied, with perhaps only a few subscribers exclusively L= poets. So I'd been given the wrong sense of what the list was.

I begin to wonder, too, whether the big division proclaimed between the LP movement and the rest of poetry is really useful. Some of the recent posts suggest that it isn't. For after all, poetry using unfamiliar methods of communication goes back at least to Rimbaud (1870) and Mallarmé (1880-1890). Everybody knows about Dada, Modernism, Surrealism, and Black Mountain. Plus various unclassifiables like Gertrude Stein, Laura Riding, Bunting and Ashbery. And the Naropa Institute. So I'm not yet certain that LP has introduced anything that wasn't already there. If writing non-representationally is the key, we have to acknowledge that almost none of Wallace Stevens is representational. If disjunctiveness is the key, then no one could be more disjunctive than Ashbery. If collage is it, then the Surrealists did it long ago—ditto for automatic writing. Meanwhile the other poetry, the one based on narrative, on representing sensory impressions verbally, or providing philosophical or meditative discourse, was always attentive to experimentation and used some of the new techniques as well. Just maybe the same situation obtains today, with some poets fusing the two approaches. My own impression of Hejinian was that *My Life* was an autobiographical narrative and therefore at some level representational; plus a constant intrusion of cognitive "interference," words used like (metaphor) paint—a kind of alogical interruption to transparent narrative. Isn't this a fusion of the two? To use a comparison from music, "classical" music of this century has again and again borrowed from jazz—but then so has jazz borrowed from "classical" music over and again. There's no Stravinsky without jazz and there's no Mingus without Stravinsky.

Maybe LANGUAGE poetry really isn't a separate movement at all, but instead is just poetry, multisourced and not really describable in simple terms as truly distinct from the other poetry?

As for signing on to POETICS, I'll think about it, Maria, it's just that there are demands on my time and a mailbox already overloaded with messages from two other groups.

From: Marjorie Perloff

Subject: Joris's Celan and Corn on L poetry

I'm so glad, Jonathan, that you mentioned Pierre Joris's new translation of Celan [Breathturn]. It is STUNNING. Pierre's command of German, French, English is incomparable and he's a poet who really has a feel for Celan. This is, for me, a major poetry event.

But I must confess to being very discouraged by the Alfred Corn conversation that's been going on on this net for the last few days. This Poetics Discussion Group was, after all, founded at Buffalo by, yes, Language poets and although I myself feel the term language poetry has outlived its usefulness (like any school), and although it's true that the so-called L poets are often very different from one another (and obviously some are much better than others—again, as in any movement), the fact remains that L poetry has made an enormous difference in the poetics of the 80s and 90s and that, on the other hand, poets like Alfred Corn and J. D. McClatchy and any of their poet friends at Yale Review and similar places have vigorously opposed it or, at best, ignored it.

Corn is being just a little bit disingenuous: he and his friends win all the prizes (Guggenheims, MacArthurs etc), are reviewed in the NYT Book Review (unlike Clark Coolidge or Lyn Hejinian or Charles Bernstein) and are very successful. ... When the big and exciting conference on Visual Poetics was held by the dept of Spanish-Portugese last spring (starring the deCampos brothers and including, among many others, Steve McCaffery, Johanna Drucker, and Charles Bernstein), not one faculty member of the Yale English dept. showed up.

So why are so many people on this net like Keith Tuma suddenly so pleased and grateful that—gee!—Alfred Corn is actually willing to participate in discussion with members about Language poetry! And why is Maria saying that she never writes about language poetry anyway. Maria, that's just not true. You do write about language poetry (as in Stein, Duncan, other precursors, yes?) in the larger sense of the term, and respecting the rights of others can turn into capitulation, no? .

Alfred says of Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* that being autobiographical, it does have representational elements. Well of course. Many of us have said this in print. The old chestnut that "language poetry" doesn't "say" anything has finally been

laid to rest. And as a new generation of students arrives on the scene, I've learned that they have no problems with the "meanings," in, say, Lyn's *Oxota*, which my theory class at Stanford read last year and loved. There were a number of Russians in the class and they were especially pleased by their "shock of recognition." Their finding the persons and places they know well in this book.

As for Rimbaud's "dereglement de tous les sens," I'd say that it's very different from the projects of the L poets even as it is from Corn's own poetry. The point of comparison has to be not a great poet of the 19th C (Blake, Rimbaud etc.) whom we can all agree on but what is happening NOW. And here there's just no use saying that there are no differences.

I'm sorry to sound like an old grouch on this one. But I feel that as an outsider (i.e. not a poet) I can say some of these things: to wit, that until the system of prize-giving and award-giving changes appreciably, there is no use pretending that the Establishment Doesn't Exist.

From: Ron Silliman

Subject: Children of the Corn

Chax writes (rightly),

>I keep reading the phrase, first from Corn, then repeated by others quoting him, about "poetry using unfamiliar methods of communication" at least since Rimbaud & Mallarme. Every time I hear that it just grates.... But perhaps what I don't like about this phrase, as much as its specific form, is how easily Corn tosses it off, as though, because it is old hat to do something "unfamiliar" (or innovative? or building on other's innovations?), it is therefore not very interesting or valuable.... "various unclassifiabiles" (this too sounds like some kind of put down)

As to Marjorie's:

>And as a new generation of students arrives on the scene, I've learned
> that they have no problems with the "meanings," in, say, Lyn's Oxota,
> which my theory class at Stanford read last year and loved. There
> were a number of Russians in the class and they were especially
> pleased by their "shock of recognition." Their finding the persons
> and places they know well in this book.

I just got done teaching at what was basically a glorified composition program at Bard College. For this class I was given an anthology that had poets like Jorie Graham ("Framing") and Ted Weiss ("Fractions") and Lyn Hejinian (My Life, two sections from it) and Charles Bernstein ("A Defence of Poetry"). I tried for the first time to teach without dogma, to teach, in other words, all of these poets (they made me teach Weiss but that is another story). After I was done I asked students to answer a series of questions about how they related to each poem. Questions were: 1) do you take anything away from this poem? if so what, if not why not? 2) what images, devices, or other parts of the poem stick out in your mind? 3) are there any parts of the poem that you identify with or feel a special relation to? All but one of the students didn't like the Weiss

(this might be because Weiss also came to read and I think the student that liked the poem skipped the reading). When it comes to what the students liked it seemed to be tied between the other three (even though I didn't ask them almost all of them ranked the poets). I found also that the students had "no problems with the 'meaning'" or with the nonconventional language. Some of their comments were useful (and I did not encourage them to value the work of one poet over another): On Hejinian: "I like the writing style of My Life. I identified with the style of writing, picking out memories, making correlations about your life, but keeping it loose and not super-analytical." On Bernstein: "The poem made me realize how difficult I make things for myself. I read it two times before I could allow myself to just let it be nonsense." "Bernstein makes sense— many times I'll read into a work too much and it'll turn to mush and get more confusing than it should be." "I relate to this poem because I feel the poet's frustration in a way." "Bernstein's poem I was excited about. Especially when we did that translation. That seemed to stick with me. Also it was so true how by not really studying closely you could decipher what he had written. I liked that."

What I am now wondering: have other people asked similar questions? what have been the results? But also I am also wondering how much of this has to do with the teaching method used at Bard in this program which is something that might be close to Peter Elbow's ideology. Like one of the reason I think My Life might have been available to them as a text was that one of their assignments was to imitate it (write something that is 18 sentences long and without narrative connection). Several of these pieces turned out to be the ones that the student like the best (they would read them at group readings or put them in their portfolios). I'm not sure it is totally the teaching method (I've taught similar works in more traditional classrooms and had some success with them). But it just made me begin to think about what new teaching methods might be required to teach this work.

Sorry to go on at such length about something that might be of little interest. I am curious about this reading and identification issue because it seems to haunt so many of the dismissals of alternative type poetry (and poetry seems to have something to do with identity and identification as the relentless autobiographical impulse of confessional poetry illustrates). Yet, at the same time, I feel that the dismissal of alternative type poetry on the argument that such works don't allow identification is without evidence.

As is obvious, I'm dying to do some real ethnographic work on this issue. Maybe when I get a job...

From: Kevin Killian

Subject: A happy result of a long process

I know some of you are tired of the whole renga ordeal, but this is my take on the subject.

I was asked to contribute to an anthology of "erotica" (ie porn) called "Switch Hitters" (from Cleis Press) the premise being, everything else being equal, that lesbians would write gay male erotica and gay men try our hands at lesbian erotica. The editors encouraged me, saying that I, I Kevin Killian, had one advantage –because I, unlike many of the other male contributors, have actually seen a vagina.

Still I was stumped for a topic, no, what would Henry James call it, a donnee!

So when the renga began to appear, I found it! My story, "Renga," takes place at a writers' colony in Connecticut, the narrator is a New Formalist called Jane, whose tired old poetry has begun to bore even herself, tho it has won many prizes. A young girl comes to her bungalow every morning with her breakfast-this girl, an aspiring, perky language writer, re-invigorates Jane physically and changes her entire approach to poetics when the two collaborate on a renga together. (And much else, since the editors demand 1 sex act on every two pages.) All this on the sunny beaches of Long Island Sound and the exquisite, semi-secluded grounds of the writers' colony.

When I was casting about for a name for this vibrant character, the maid, I was calling her "Karen"-don't know why! But Dodie suggested, "Lee Ann"—don't know why! Anyhow the story was finished, accepted, look for it in February, and thanks everybody for all your assistance and inspiration ... you will all recognize your individual lines of poetry for sure.

Okay-see you!

From: Louis Cabri

Subject: "is my bubble showing?"

The collaborative poem dulls and repeats when it lacks context. I'd say context is provided, and collective attentiveness created by the prose discussion. When the prose flags, the poetry becomes a-contextual somehow, performing eventual reifying services of the medium itself. In this medium the critical specificity that social contexts provide is made homogeneous and is virtually erased – markers affecting context, for instance just the fact of a post from New Zealand, or a post of Sept. 15th at 3:00 a.m. on a rented computer, etc., all but their names are erased from the emailed message (in Jakobson's sense) itself, unlike, obviously, a letter (e.g. a type of paper, ink, envelope, etc., in short, of a specific letter, from NZ). An established poet whose name is a currency in many media/genres and an unknown name floating solely in the listserv perform as peers, in a way, to a context-in-the-making (if there will be any at all). The most hardy and only context of the medium readily seems to be purely the informational one of distributing news economically. Good morning Virilio. Beyond that, what sort of informational poetics can arise? There needn't be anything more, of course. But if there is a desire for there to be something more, as perhaps the collaborative poem is hopefully a signal of (surely not the opposite, that is, narcissistic emblems of a socioeconomically stable/wealthy livelihood??)... – then it would seem, tautologically, that social context will arise only through the information contributed, and that this would take form in the prose discussion (= the world). One available contextual tension the medium can create for "itself" and its agents beyond the role of information-distribution seems to be the dynamic between the poetry and the prose. When the prose diminishes, so too the poetry's affectiveness. I'm suggesting that the collaborative poem diminishes in appeal when a) the fetishistic aspect of the medium itself is allowed to dominate, going surreally out of control in the form of sheer quantity of postings by single and few contributors to the poem, and when b) there is a dwindling of prose dialogue – the only means of supplying contexts of address for the collaborative poem due to the character of the medium itself. So I think that the dismissal of the poetry is misplaced, or at best only half the story. Good night.

From: Mark Wallace

Subject: bland abstract lyrics, or you've got wheat in your eye

Ron Silliman's side comment, a few days ago, that "bland abstract lyrics" are now the dominant strain of avant garde writing in 1995 is a criticism that emerging avant garde writers need to pay close attention to. The silence attending his remark (which, admittedly, he made on the side of other concerns) is disturbing. Do the younger avant garde writers on this list accept Ron's characterization? Are the potential implications of such a comment (that new avant garde writers are out of touch, apolitical, or otherwise spaced out) also things that you accept? I think that there's a far vaster range of committed, intelligent, and innovative emerging writers out there than such a comment would imply, although it may be true that there's more bland abstract disengagement than we ought to be comfortable with. Whatever the truth of Ron's statement, is it acceptable for younger writers to let an older, justifiably respected writer such as Ron Silliman be the only commentator on this list on the subject of what emerging avant garde writers are up to? Would not quiet on this subject imply a (perhaps unintentional) public agreement, an implied agreement that we ought very definitely to challenge?

From: Gale Nelson

Subject: Re: bland abstract lyrics

I find it an interesting leap for Mark to make that Ron was necessarily referring to younger writers as being those for whom the air was coming out of the lyrical balloon. If we accept the bait, that Ron is casting doubt on a new generation (rather than, say, his casting a wider net of concern over poetry generally), then perhaps a younger generation will have to articulate the multiplicity of designs it has on the future of poetics. Variantly, if Ron's concern is more general, then everyone is welcome to leap in, and contemplate.

Question. Where does the younger generation begin? End? What can be said to be holding it together? What could be said to be holding together the previous generation? How do we define the parameters of that generation? Is it useful to generalize (say, poets from city x like to write about boats, whereas those from city b are likely to use gerunds a great deal, and poets who are friends with a tend to disdain representation...). Are movements in poetry fluid or static? Are poets?

From: Mark McMorris

Subject: Re: bland abstract lyrics

Yet another act of delurking (=lug rude kin):

1) Bland of course is in the eye of the beholder, but I suppose one means poetry that is monotonous, unmodulated and unaccented, clever rather than perceptive, perceptive rather than selective, meandering rather than directed, vague, hubristic, histrionic, picture-postcard dull—in short, metrically and procedurally commonplace. A few queries: is the abstract bland? Can there be a non-bland abstract (there can be a non-abstract bland, as we know)? By abstract are we to understand a bad case of conceptual manipulation à la late Stevens (without his ear or eye—or brain, for that matter)? Is "The Triumph of Life" bland? Abstract? (Yes on both?) Is Stein's Tender Buttons abstract (I assume it's not bland)? Is Césaire's Ferraments abstract? (No) Is it conceptual? (Yes) Lisible? (no) Scriptible? (yes) Moving?

2) I know that procedural ingenuity or formal obliquity has produced most of the interesting (to me) poetry in the US in the last 50 years, but if I am to make any sense at all, I must also say that the very same poets who opened up and kept open the still lively and living (a pesky romantic metaphor) forms of poetry around today themselves could be world-class bores. Being dull seems to be an occupational hazard of innovative writers—am I quoting here?—who venture into areas to invent them and on happy occasions (e.g., "A"-12, Prelude) are able release poetry, on other occasions (e.g., "A"-12, Prelude) fail miserably to make anything happen that hasn't already happened elsewhere to greater effect (in conversations with Celia or Paul, for instance, to which I am not privy). Who can read Paterson through without a shudder of dismay? Williams and Zukofsky were onto something that became important for US poetry in the years after them and one might well tolerate the bland in "A"-12 in order to arrive at the sense of design in small matters as well as in large that Zukofsky undoubtedly (to me) managed to build in. What does this have to do with poets writing now? I suppose I'm trying sneakily to suggest that in a survey of any today one must expect a certain amount of the bland, but that it would be very unlikely if the Americas in 1995 were uniformly anything, let alone bland.

Let's say that an attention to syntax and decontextualized, rigorously anti-mimetic linguistic subversion/resistance characterized the underground now overground practice of the recent US avant-garde. Younger poets writing now,

some say the emerging poets, would I think both profit from this massive exploration of poetry as unwarrantable language given a welcome charge of distinct audibility, and want to refuse it in specific ways and parts, just as a reader might wish Zukofsky had cut some of the beginning of "A"-12 for poetry's sake (I hope that expressing such a wish in order to make a point does not mark me as narrow-minded or condescending—I admire Z and find his poetics both meaningful to my efforts and succinctly comprehensive). Such a refusal might well produce boring poetry if it takes place in a vacuum of further ideas, but imitating somebody else's practice certainly would (and does) produce boredom all round.

It also seems to me that bland lyrics is a fairly good description of the bulk of poetry of any period (including American poetry since the war).

3) By concealing artifice, Williams' respected example has helped to excuse the general neglect of rhythmic design—in the phrase, line, paragraph, and work—in contemporary American avant-garde poetry (but see *At Passages*, et al.), and therefore, together with Moore and Pound, can be blamed for the later standardization of voice at the expense of arrangement, perception at the expense of rhythm, which absolutely guarantees bland poetry. Recent comments against Williams on this list seem to want to shoot the messenger of an American voice—one seemingly without art—now that Williams has been so clearly exposed as the "thoughtless" message in much contemporary writing. This is unfair. Taking a different direction, I would say that the fault lies not with the doctor but with the glut of words masquerading as idea in the discourse on poetry and on literature generally, or with the loss of — an energizing loss, looked at in a certain way — generic boundaries. Does the word poetry name anything apart from a context of presentation? Tell me that the answer is YES. If I am a poet, I must suppose that I am not writing a context of presentation but a poem. How can I know that this is so? Circles make me dizzy. Here again, the doctor of Paterson must take some of the responsibility for at once opening up a wider terrain of poetry and, one might say, thinning it out and confusing the workers. I could (as you could) write a list of fairly recent books that work excellently from the former without succumbing to the latter, but still areas in Paterson (or Maximus) usefully diagnose the disagreeable vague monotony some object to in poetry today. ...

4) But then again, (following up on Gale's remarks) are there any monoliths? states? who gets to count as the younger generation? I can never shake the feeling that all talk of generations, schools, movements in the US will remain premature because of the sheer size of the educated population. And that maybe

what one could call a systematic synecdochic substitution complex—a few people for a whole continent—prompts me to continue talking about (non-)entities like the state of contemporary poetry in the US. Oh well.

From: Mark Wallace

Subject: and even more bland abstract lyrics

I appreciate Gale Nelson's caution that Ron may be referring to a larger swath of avant garde writing than I suggested earlier. But I don't think, in fact, that he is, or at least to any huge extent. He has commented before about the Writing From the New Coast anthology, and various other projects having to do with avant garde writers who have only begun to publish books in the 1990s (one possible way of defining "emerging," however tentatively). Although I think that Ron's critique is to a certain extent incorrect, I think he means it seriously and his position is not completely without justification—which is why, I think, it does need refutation.

Look at it this way—Ron Silliman is an excellent poet, a first rate critic, and one of the most thoroughly open commentators we have on this poetics list—he's got the guts to constantly say exactly what he's thinking. While I don't always agree (by any means) with the things he says, I think he's got an uncanny knack for putting his finger exactly where key problems are. And I think that emerging "post-language" avant garde writers have, at the very least, a real identity problem. I mean, if a committed avant gardist like Ron Silliman can't see the value in what emerging writers are doing, who's going to? At least he READ Writing From the New Coast.

For Jordan Davis and Al Nielsen and others who questioned my "definitions," I certainly agree that such definitions are always problematic, but I also think that saying so may be to a certain extent beside the point. Wittgenstein once said, when talking of language games, "And for those who find my definition of language games too inexact, I reply, isn't an inexact definition often what we need?" That is, the inexactness of absolute definitions for terms is precisely the situation we're in all the time—the inexactness of definition is the very ground on which communication takes place. So, yes, terms like "avant garde," "emerging," "younger," "generation," and "Ron Silliman" for that matter are problematic and inexact, but also highly USEFUL. Besides, Jordan, I'm not "defending younger writers." It's my perception, I think a correct one, that Ron has been guilty of too great a generalization regarding emerging avant garde writers. I was not calling for some generalized "defense," but for PARTICULAR RESPONSES.

While I agree with Jeff Hansen's comments that too much belief in the social value of the "new" brings with it a whole host of problems, I can't quite go as far as he does in what I think he's suggesting also—that innovation is no longer possible in poetry. I don't think that's true at all, although it may be true that innovation doesn't necessarily happen in the places people often look for it—in the most outrageous and "different" NEW THING. I find Jeff's work, for instance, incredibly innovative—look at what he's doing in "Landscapes" in the most recent AVEC, or his chapbook "The Monologues of Joe Blow Only Artsy" from Texture Press. So I think that Jeff is overstating his case against innovation just a little bit, and in a way that distorts the insightful innovations of his own work.

Rod Smith—yes, nonresponse does not equal implicit agreement, but does it count as effective counterargument in this case? The question comes down to, I suppose, whether one considers Ron's critique worth responding to. I think it is, because I think he's a serious critic and a great writer. I think that you probably think so too—correct me if I'm wrong—so I think your support of nonresponse seems a little disingenuous. Besides, you responded! As did many others who usefully complicated my initial query—Mark McMorris' highly thoughtful piece really embroils us in some necessary complexities.

So let me say, again, that I think there is a REAL identity crisis haunting emerging avant garde writers, and one that's worth talking about publicly. This problem is behind the idea of the Poetic Briefs forum that Jeff will be doing in the next issue of Poetic Briefs, both as response to my essay in #19, and on any other topic related to questions facing the avant garde at this moment. ...

From: Larry Price

Subject: Pens fall and begin to harvest

Steve Carll wrote: "When you forget something, when you erase it, aren't forgetting and erasing modes of relating to that something?"

Amid the assorted food labels, brochures, and badly written yet impeccably designed detritus that is my automaton's scramble for survival, the icons of forgetting and erasure are perhaps understandably privileged. Still, I agree with your reluctance to reify. So that particular notion of forgetting was not what I found compelling in Peter Larkin's statement, nor what I intended by using the term "erasure."

That is, not a forgetting (or erasing) in the sense of a toolbox (click on icon and drag to trash), an amnesial or erasive intentionality directed always and in nostalgia backward (the past as the desire that makes desire be present), but rather in the sense of "Not this." That is, the perpetual vapor trail that language in fact sprays before it, the head in arrears, Duchamp's nickel-plated child which the "person" completes on the horizontal blank page overwriting the master pages of autonomy. (At the very least, we know power won't deny itself.)

(Although I have to say I like the Lacanian intrigue in the past coming to presence as what is no longer presence. Which must be where all these careful discriminations between sense and nonsense go to become nonsense.)

When I say "we are in relation to the present," this in itself is a heuristic device, a machine devised-toward-the remedial present. I suppose it is remedial because (I agree) it is never a clean break, shaped as it is within an assumed, at least culturally imposed restricted economy of being. That remedial ground is, of course, the text. It functions to process the communicable intransigence of what is into the uncommunicated, hence infinitely available outside of what isn't.

Power is one issue. As one, it falls to us in its compensatory claim of mastery (or clarity) It seems to me it is this mastery/clarity that is at issue (among other places, in Mark Wallace's usefully raised issues). That is, mastery, when it arrives as the default version ("perfection is basic to this mode"), takes as its register a simultaneity of face and facework, reader and writer. It fulfills itself

in this way as part of a guarantee that having fulfilled itself once and as a one it won't have to do so again and certainly not in its parts. The language of power is structured from the neant on down.

But here Peter Larkin's notion of the "weak" intrigues me. It leads me to a question for Mark Wallace: to what extent is the category of post-language-avant-garde-emerging-publishing in the 90s-younger generation a strategizing of attachment and dis-attachment (in the sense – I think – PL is writing of it)?

From: Tom Beard

Subject: Re: identity problems in the wild blue

Mark Wallace wrote -

- >As Rod pointed out in his introduction to the recent Barrett Watten
- > issue of Aerial, for Watten language poetry simply can't be understood
- > without the context of the Vietnam war and an intense search on
- > the part of Watten and others for a way to best respond to that
- >particular crisis. Was that the only impetus for early Language poetry?
- >Probably not, but it certainly has to be considered extremely important.

This interested me, since most of the critical/theoretical writing in *In the American Tree* has an emphasis on politics that to me seems very much a product of the sixties. Is it possible that those of us who did most of our growing up after the Vietnam war, and whose parents were of the protest generation, might subscribe to a different poetics? Some of the poetic/political goals of langpo and post-structuralist theory (e.g. breaking down the assumption of a single, given meaning for a text) have almost become second nature for more recent generations, who have a much-vaunted mistrust of any imposed narratives.

Are we more likely to have an apolitical outlook (which is itself a political stance), or ecological concerns, or gender/sexuality/race concerns for those who feel disadvantaged by these factors? Or are we more likely to be interested in information technology and the mass media? One movement that sees itself as replacing the domesticated postmodernism of a past generation is 'Avant-Pop' literature, with the likes of Mark Leyner, Kathy Acker, William Gibson, Eurudice and Douglas Coupland realizing that disrupted narratives, a multiplicity of voices and ironic plagiarism are no longer cutting edge (they're a Levi's commercial) and that Bob Dylan lyrics no longer count as pop-culture references. Most of these writers use prose as a medium: who would you count as an Avant-Pop poet?

The generational change has probably been exacerbated in NZ by the rapid change in the latter half of the 80s from a stiflingly over-protected Albanian style of economy to what some see as an overly laissez-faire regime. Global popular culture has exploded into this country in the last 5-10 years, and the literary establishment has no idea how to handle it. The Left is now conservative, trying to regain a welfare state that now glows with nostalgia. This rightwards movement economically, simultaneous with a belated diversification of cultures, is the extent of the political concerns in my writing. Has anyone else felt the need to react against the assumption that a writer must take certain political stands?

From: Steve Evans

Subject: Re: poetry and politics

Apropos the friendship/politics/poetry question, I have been thinking about the way "friendship" is inflected within the context of the broader attempts at racial resegregation such as we have been experiencing since c.1980 and which now threatens to pass the critical mark (pace the decision of my alma mater, the UC system, while the students were away this summer!).

That's what was on my mind when I wrote the following in a paper on Frank O'Hara and the way O'Hara criticism (my examples: Perloff and Bredbeck) has worked to reproduce the racial segregation his work put into serious question. Please forgive, if you can, the ungainly prose:

"Independent, as opposed to commercial and institutional, publishing tends to be directly embedded in the immediate social relations of the people who undertake it, and this the more so the closer one approaches the basal unit of such independent production: the restricted-circulation poetry magazine. The social conditions of production of this form typically involve an editor (or editors), relying on monies not generated within the poetic field (i.e. earnings from a "real job," inheritance, or patronage), and possessed of sufficient amounts of time to absorb the whole spectrum of activities (selecting, editing and proofing, reproducing, binding, circulating, and publicizing) that in institutional and commercial contexts are divided among different specialists. This situation of embeddedness, in which literary project and personal life converge to the point of mutual subsumption, is an objectively ambivalent one: though often perceived from the inside as the positive confluence of poetry and the sphere of elective affinity and friendship, viewed from the "outside" it can appear as clique-ish arbitrariness. The same ambivalence can be registered in racial terms, for if independent publishing is at least potentially a site in which the "spontaneous" desegregation of cultural production can occur—since no formal mechanisms restrict the editorial decision-making process on racial, or indeed any other, grounds—it is by the same token, however, that the very appearance of "spontaneity" can work to veil the de facto segregations of everyday life and to elide the way that even (one might say "especially") friendship patterns are overdetermined within a society "in which systems of dominance and subordination are structured through processes of racialization that continuously interact with all other forces of socialization" (Carby 193). The objective ambivalence resulting from the pre- and de-formation of spheres

of "elective affinity" by selective processes operating at the level of the social totality is of especial importance in the context of the New American Poetry, which consistently foregrounded its own passionate informality and 'openness' in contrast to the bureaucratization of culture epitomized by academic poetry and the institutionally-affiliated journals that sustained it. I would argue that both the independent publications and the poetic formations that crystallized around them did represent gains in the democratization of culture relative to the corporate and university publishing structures, but these gains were not without their own contradictions."

[The Hazel Carby piece referred to is "The Multicultural Wars" in Gina Dent & Michele Wallace's *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay P, 1992)]

From: Peter Larkin

Subject: Re: Wild Blue Yonder

Steve Carll is quite right, a total forgetting would be of the how as well as the what; it would no longer be an act, as the forgetting would itself be forgotten. In cultural terms, the process can be nothing like as absolute, but where forgetting is "deliberate" it is not in itself forgotten, but remembered either as a strategy "clearing the decks", or can set off some sort of work of mourning. The latter seems the David Jones area, though he also liked to think of a healthy culture as baggily retentive and found it difficult to let anything go. Perhaps some sort of ecological model might serve, where cultures assimilate organically over long periods, but then reach a "post-climax" stage defined by dissemination, absolute innovation and depletion. But through all that are the minimal attachments required to keep any sort of societal or cultural possibility in play at all, a play not in itself within the terms of a general dissemination.

I have been thinking about these things in a recent piece of writing called "Let Attachment Assoil Us", and a couple of paras from the Prefatory Note I would quite like to float here, to see if they seem to mean anything:

Whatever has the instinct of attachment operates as a careful fragment in our culture. The fragment's present form seems penetrated (beyond break-point) by the liability of not being a discard, but only gradually does it continue to own the vocation of an unsafe unity.

The gift is ill-received as much as lost, and the former condition must go on figuring within a poetics of retention that would revise our habits of acceptance. Only out of this primal grasping can a poetic offering, along a road of self-forgiveness rather than negativity, be made. Without an acknowledgement of the charged nature of burden, of the fact we are all owners of the fantasy of numinous attachment, alterity itself would be a figment. The unpossessed has transformed itself into the unreleasable, but until a gesture is made in time with this burden, the resistance of the other cannot even appear. And if it does appear it will not appear alone, the power of resistance will no longer be confused with autonomy. The justified weaker term will have won a freedom, beyond strategic manipulations normalising opposition, to attach itself.

From: Jeff Hansen

Subject: wild blue yonder

Larry Price ... wondered how I could apply the term "wild blue yonder" to a piece by Ron Silliman such as "Ketjak." I wasn't. ... I was concerned less with the work of Silliman—which I admire for the most part—than with the various ways that he has discussed the poetry of the "emerging generation," both in the posting noted by Mark Wallace and in other places. Silliman has made several comments that seem to indicate he values new poetic techniques in younger poets, rather than their exploring the possibilities within, between and around techniques already in existence. I take issue with his seeming preference for the radically new over other types of exploration. Both seem valuable to me, although I am skeptical about the possibility of creating radically new forms right now—which is why I termed preference for The New as "the wild blue yonder."

From: Ron Silliman

Subject: Re: wild blue yonder

I really appreciate Jeff Hansen's argument for exploration between formal (in the strictest sense) boundaries rather than, say, beyond them, even if I don't know (understand?) whether or not that sentiment might be shared by others. It raises a lot of interesting questions for reading and interpretation and seems to me a terrific road into a lot of work. I had not meant my comments to be strictly taken as referring to an "emerging" generation (one that stretches out from people who are my own age, more or less, a la Selby and Basinski, to people in their early 20s), but I often hope to see my posts here as a prod to comment, and here Jeff takes that phrase in very useful direction.

Here is a for instance: Peter Gizzi is a superb and subtle craftsperson, so much so that his use of Spicer and the serial poem turn into a demonstration of the Esthetic as such, a result that strikes me as antithetical to Spicer's almost Celine-esque anti-aesthetic tendencies. Gizzi's Spicer seems closer to Bonnefoy than Celine or even Prevert. Clearly Gizzi is extending the mode of the serial poem in a direction unanticipated by Spicer, creating in some sense a different Spicer than the one I have read (where in fact I often find a horror of the aesthetic). Is this the same or different from the way in which (to pick a pseudoparallel) John Taggart and Ronald Johnson might be said to have read a different Zukofsky than the one read by Bernstein and Andrews?

I agree with Hansen that the idea of extending "innovation" to predictable logical conclusions ("typing" as someone once said of Kerouac's form) is of little interest, especially 80 years after zaum first demonstrated a range of possibility there. Similarly, all sound poetry "says the same thing" and it says it over and over.

Where formal innovation typically occurs (I'm making a wildly broad generalization here) is when the society underlying a given mode of verse production changes so that new writers (younger or otherwise—Olson was a late bloomer and WCW wrote *Spring & All* in his late 30s) bring in newly recognized territories and modes of the social into their work as form. I don't want to reduce this to some crude variation of base/superstructure economic determinism, but there is a constant and dynamic tension. Next to Snoop Doggy Dog, exactly how white does the French-inflected lyric poem sound? Next to Chuck D?

Hansen's argument echoes (consciously?) part of Robert Duncan's poetics of derivation and does so in ways that are not reductive and simplistic. I'd love to hear people open that line of thinking up further.

From: John Cayley

Subject: Inscription in complex media

Ron Silliman wrote:

>My sense is that any work in hypertext that is good would be good

>writing in an absolutely hide-bound traditional print format...

>

>Also, the word on the street is that the archivists are avoiding

>collecting disks of manuscripts like the plague, even though in many

>programs you could tell, for example, how many levels of revision (and

>length of composition) were involved.

...

>These tools at hand are still very primitive, if we just envision what

>they will look like in 100 years...

Joe Amato responded (in part):

>i would simply like to add that this does NOT mean (nor do i take ron or

>jim as suggesting anything of the sort) that folks shouldn't wander off and

>play in said tinkertoy directions... i learned a lot, methinks, from

>TINKERTOYS--and building blocks...

Yes, much of the good writing that has been inscribed as hypertext would be good in other media. But this is not an argument which implies that it should appear in another form. That is a decision within the gift of the writer. Some writing, however, either could not exist in more 'traditional' media, or would

not be so elegantly presented as it would in cyber/hypertext (there is a useful distinction here, btw).

In particular, I mean texts where ‘chance operations’ and/or algorithmic transformations are applied to given texts and the writer insists that the ‘real time’ results of these procedural operations are her inscription on the surface of a complex medium. (Where did I get that formulation from? Was it from someone on Poetics?) I would also argue, as I have elsewhere, that the cybertual author has the potential to compose procedures themselves and this should become a recognized part of the process of inscription/writing.

As for elegance of presentation: it would be possible to transpose Jim Rosenberg’s Intergrams to paper-like media in, perhaps, a huge book-art installation. But one of the beauties of this work is its elegance – the deep complexity produced by the layering which his HyperCard form allows; the ability not simply to move through layers of word clusters, but also to move up and down a syntactically structured hierarchy of such clusters, to obtain multiple views of the ‘same’ content. All this is done with minimal, and as I say, elegant programming. That said, it is the content-as-form which is the tenor of the (all) work, leading to its ultimate significance.

So what if the cybertext systems of the new millennium will be tiny implants with the power of a Cray? Today’s text processing system is not the civil war typewriter of tomorrow, because it is realized on shape-shifting silicon and I guess that the computers of tomorrow will not be qualitatively different from the computers of today (i.e. they will still be faceless, invisible machines programmed to perform as any or all as-yet-undreamt-of appliances). The computer underlies the systems we’re using but it is not to be identified with them. It transforms itself into typewriter, typesetter, cybertext system, etc, etc through software. Primitive software needn’t be written off, it can be rewritten or ‘upgraded’.

Computer-based hardware/software configurations became potential media for literary art in, I would say, the late 80s when reasonably designed screen fonts, wysiwyg, and software such as HyperCard first appeared. Now that the WWW is with us, there is no reason not to make substantive use of the various potential media available [– and transpose the ‘good stuff’ back into print if you insist].

There’s a more serious problem with the idea of writing underlying Ron’s post, as if there is something called ‘writing’ which exists independently of its actual inscription in a particular medium, and which, if it is ‘good’, has the

additional quality of being capable of transposition into media with which we are more familiar. Does this hold up?

The archivists Ron cites are wrong, wrong, wrong. It is not for the archivist to determine what is a proper record of the writers' processes of composition. If a writer happens to make a draft on a disk using the first version of Wordstar using a Sirius PC, or on the inside of a matchbox, and then later destroys or encrypt all early drafts of an unpublished work that circulated on the bulletin board of a private network – I just can't see that the archival or text critical problems this might cause are made qualitatively different because of the media used, or that this indicates that we should all make sure to get it down on paper in order to keep the librarians happy.

Finally, although I completely accord with the tenor of Joe's light-hearted response to Ron's post, I can't help baulking at the image of the tinkertoy (which I also learned from during a Canadian childhood), the implication that despite the likelihood that these systems will appear to be toys to the right-thinking, we can nonetheless use and learn from them in our spare time.

Computer-based systems are emphatically not tinkertoys, not even in the world of letters. They are what we make of them. There is bound to be a ludic element in the wide spectrum of current cybertextual work, but then, hasn't there been a ludic element in much experimental work generally? And isn't the ludic OK anyway?

From: Jerry Rothenberg

Subject: on Pound

This is in reply to Tenney's query about my own statement that the the most telling impact of Pound's work was on poets who politically, morally, might have been at the greatest distance from it. To start with my own experience – growing up when I did – the presence of Pound in the late 1940s was, to say the least, a bewilderment. I was stunned by much of the poetry, both by how it read (the language of it) and by what I heard it saying: anti-war & anti-capital & powerful too in its presentation of a way, a means, of approaching & hoping to shape the world through the poet's means, the poetry itself. I was about 16 years old at a first reading of him & shortly thereafter – along with the reading – came the awarding of the Bollingen & the tremendous fuss that that stirred up (close to fifty years ago). With that we were aware also of the extent of Pound's fascism &, as became clearer over the years, the viciousness of the anti-semitism in his World War II broadcasts – a lunacy of language common to the fringe of homegrown fascists who were also in his entourage. My own first published piece of writing was a letter to the New York Post (a different NY Post at that time) in which I lamented what I thought had happened to Pound and what had become (as it still seems to be) a conundrum around the man & the work the man had given us. There was a lot I didn't know then but knowing it would certainly not have made it easier.

I was never, in any sense, a Poundian, since there were too many other threads & lines coming into my awareness to allow a focus (in that sense) on any single individual. But the observation of Pound's impact – on myself & others – began shortly after that: the observation that those who were most significantly building on Pound's poetics & actual poetry were not the crazies & the fascist hoods of the John Kasper variety, etc., but poets like Kelly, Olson, Duncan, Mac Low, Blackburn, & before them the whole gallery of "Objectivists" or – from other directions – any number of European and Latin American writers – all of them (as I understood it) with a political and moral sense (coming out of World War II) that was strongly anti-fascist, strongly in opposition to the totalitarian barbarisms for which Pound (in the years of his fascist infatuation) had become a minor flunky. In their context Pound became, remained a vital force – the proof, through them, of what was right & germinal about him and the proof, conversely, of what was evil – & banal in Hannah Arendt's sense – in his succumbing to the "fascist temptation."

What Pound offered and in some sense made possible wasn't divorced from the political but wasn't at the same time tied to what became HIS politics. It was a demonstration of how the political – as history – could enter the body of the poem – how the poem could thrive on what Ed Sanders (many years later & clearly drawing on Pound) spoke of as "data clusters" defining a new "investigative poetry". I don't need to go on with this, I think, except to note that it was (as far as I can recollect) not the little fascists who learned from this but poets who by disposition and, I believe, commitment were looking for a way out of the fascist & totalitarian nightmare that had threatened to overwhelm our world. And there was also – stronger in Pound than in most other forerunners in the North American context – a sense that history & poetry could be redefined, opened up and certainly renewed, and that for this Pound himself (as Charles B., I think, points out in his Pound essays) was a stepping-stone, a guide to things that his fascist leanings would have finally precluded. He was clearly the most extraordinary translator we had by then produced – not only pointing to Albigenian Provence and to a sense of China speaking to the present, but (coming like Césaire and the other Negritude poets) from the likes of Frobenius, forming one of the links (but only one) to an African past as a pinnacle, too, of the creative human spirit. It is not to say that this was – all of it – of Pound's doing but that he helped to set much of it in motion – much of what, coming after him & (in some sense in spite of him) – became essential to our present work.

And, finally, I would point out what was – for myself & others – the lesson of Pound's failure – the lesson of the poet who had in the long run betrayed his poetry. It is a terrible thing to say and it is, I think, a terrible possibility that faces all of us. But it is Pound who also says it best, from the "pull down thy vanity" voice in Canto 81 to the still more telling voice (where he was already into his silence, depression) in Canto 116:

I have brought the great ball of crystal

who can lift it?

Can you enter the great acorn of light?

But the beauty is not the madness

Tho' my errors and wrecks lie about me.

And I am not a demigod,

I cannot make it cohere.

I can read this, anyway, as both a confession of failure (and of betrayal – of himself & us) and at the same time a triumph of whatever is there speaking through him. ...

From: Jackson Mac Low

Subject: Pound etc.

Writing about EP is very painful & difficult. He introduced me to modern poetry in 1938, when I was 15 or 16 & in my late 3rd year or early 4th year of high school.

I discovered EP when I visited the University of Chicago campus, traveling from Kenilworth, a North Shore Chicago suburb, to the South Side of Chicago, to talk with my high school hero, Bertr& Russell. He was very nice when I phoned him (when I got out there without having phoned him first!) but he said I wasn't able to see me. (No wonder! Some high school kid calls him up out of the blue. -I met him several months later at a party on the South Side.) So I went over to the U of C bookstore & found Culture, the New Directions 1938 version of Guide to Kulchur. I read most of it st&ing up at the book table. I'd literally never read anything like it. Even though I was already "political"-a pacifist & a democratic socialist-I may not have noticed the fascism-there was so much exciting & new in it-or maybe I was already discounting the fascist parts as nutty.

On the way home I stopped by at the main Chicago Public Library (where I had a card on my father's office address) & got out several of EP's early books-Lustra, Ripostes, Cathay, & possibly the earliest edition of Personae (the aforementioned were eventually included in later editions). I read them in a high state of excitement all the way home on the El & North Shore Line trains. That led me (with some assistance from George Dillon & Peter DeVries, who then were the editor & assistant editor of Poetry, A Magazine of Verse) to all the rest of the Modernists, except for Stein, whom I'd discovered in the Marshall Field's store in Evanston several years earlier, & who later became my "favorite" of them all. I first read Pound, then Eliot, then Williams, then most of the rest of the Modernists & many other American & British poets writing c. 1900-1938. (About the same time that I discovered Donne, Herbert, & the other 17th-century Metaphysical poets, & Shakespeare's sonnets-I'd read several of the plays, of course, earlier.)

By the spring of 1939, my later senior year in high school, I was , at my English teacher's request, giving lectures on modern poetry up through Auden to our English class.

Before reading Pound, I had only read with pleasure Walt Whitman & Carl Sandburg, who were both very inspiring to me. (Before coming across them, I disliked poetry-I found metric and rhyme unbearable.)

My first poems were political-antiwar. Having been a New Deal liberal earlier, I was by then (as I've said) a democratic socialist & pacifist. Funny that, like that New Dealer Olson, I had my life as a poet changed by that fascist-& wonderful-poet.

Nearly a decade later-in 1945-Robert Duncan & I crashed a reading by Williams at the 92nd St YMHA. We talked a little to him & then I wrote to him a little later, asking among other things how Pound was.

Next thing I got a note from Pound telling me to visit Hubert Creekmore at New Directions, & the latter told me how to write back to Pound. By then I knew about the fascism, but not yet about the radio talks. EP & I exchanged sporadic notes, & eventually he was sending me Social Credit & other papers & I was sending him pacifist anarchist papers and magazines. I was by then working with an anarchist pacifist group that put out a paper first called Why?, & later, Resistance. I was a member of its editorial board from 1944 to 1954, when it died. Among those who came to our discussion group were Robert Duncan, Paul Goodman, & once, Julian Beck & Judith Malina who later began The Living Theatre. Goodman, as well as James Baldwin (once, anonymously-an account of a case of police brutality against a black man), & myself wrote for the paper, but I don't think Duncan did, tho he often came to our discussions before he moved back to the Bay Area. (Robert & I had first met my first day in NYC-on 12 September 1943, my 21st birthday, and continued to be friends for many years.)

From 1945 to 1955, fascism never came up between Pound & me. I noticed that the Social Credit papers were anti-Semitic (they advertised "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," of which they sold copies!) but I discounted Pound's fascism as psychosis. He never wrote me anything that seemed fascist, & he was fine to Jewish friends of mine who visited him at St Elizabeths (tho they said he got riled up & talked crazy when his Praetorian Guard of Southern boys showed up). He sent me books about Andrew Jackson & a bound copy of the Democratic Review that contained some first publications by Hawthorne & a speech or 2 by the pro-slavery confressman John Calhoun, which I didn't read, tho that must have been what EP wanted me to read.

So from 1945 to 1955 we talked (on paper-I never met him) about poetry mainly, tho he did give suggestions for what the anarchist-pacifists shd look

into (money, of course). (He seemed surprisingly well-inclined toward the anarchists! (Those notes from EP seem to have been spirited away.) No talk about fascism. My attitude was that you don't kick an old man in his paranoia.

But then, after reading several sections of *The Cantos* that I hadn't read before, I brought the subject up (probably in March 1955). He denied being anti-Semitic ("I never bitched Louis [Zukofsky] or Mina Loy (Levy)! [EP's paren.-near enough-her maiden name was Loewy] & of course he hadn't. Culture/Guide to Kulchur was dedicated to Zukofsky as well as to Bunting, (That's where I first saw their names.)

I then pressed EP about the meanings of certain fascist lines in *The Cantos*. I also mentioned that my father's name until about 1906 (when he was 18) was Michalowski. My father changed the name to MacLow, along with his younger brothers-the older brothers changed it to Michalow-before he came to the US in 1908, when he was 20. I didn't know then, when I mentioned it to Pound, that my father's name was Jacob MacLow when he came to the US.

(He changed it to Jackson MacLow about 1909 at the urging of his Baltimore boss. He told me this in the early 1970s, when he'd forgotten he was hiding all his background. It seems that this Southern boss, who liked him a lot-he was a good salesman-told him: "Jack, I want to call you 'Jackson,' after our great Southern general, Stonewall Jackson"! & so I became "Jackson MacLow, Jr. when I was born in 1922. (My parents, fleeing their Judaic background, gave me that very unJewish name. I separated the "Mac" from the "Low" & dropped the "Jr." in 7th or 8th grade.)

At first Pound was in denial & defensive. Then I sent him, of all things, a page from Gertrude Stein's *Wars I Have Seen*, in which she made it plain that though the Rothschilds may have controlled gold in the 19th century (I don't remember whether she mentioned the Sassoons & silver-one of EP's other hobbyhorses), they sure didn't do so by the early 20th century

I also mentioned that an acquaintance of mine, Gideon Strauss, the first Israeli consul in New York, when he was given the job of setting up a branch of the Bank of Israel in New York, couldn't find a single Jewish banker to work with him!

The upshot, of course, was a blow-up. Pound's parting shot to me was "You'll do better as Michaelovitch than MacLow."

So why am I still conflicted about Pound? I think it's obvious. He wasn't only a fascist-far more than that-& only a relatively small proportion of his poetry is fascist. (Of course this sounds like "she's only a leetle bit pregnant.") But could it be that what Pound told Allen Ginsberg when Allen visited him in Venice-that it was "a stupid suburban prejudice!"-was really what he thought it was? Could that have led to his supporting Mussolini & even Hitler?

I think Major Douglas & his Social Credit (a version of money reform that was dripping with anti-Semitism-not all money reformers are anti-Semites-had as much to do with it as Pound's moving to Italy. (He met Douglas before leaving London.) However, the whole concatenation of Western "populism", the Silver Movement, &c., which was part of his background as a Westerner, born in Idaho, had as much to do with Pound's turn toward fascism. (Ez had all too much in common with Pat Buchanan! (Curiously, there were even hints of Pound's interest in Bolshevism around the time of *An Objectivist Anthology*!)

The fact is that Pound could be a fascist & also write wonderful poetry-even after turning into a fascist! People are not integral. Certainly Pound wasn't. (I certainly have never been.). One is a different person at different times. What I referred to in the "Afterword" to *Words and Ends from Ezra*-much to my surprise-as "the spirit of Ezra Pound" (I've avoided using the word "spirit" as long as I can remember) was not that of a fascist. Tho he may have thought that he was writing a populist-reformist anticapitalist-fascist montage when he was writing *The Cantos*, it turned out to be a collage poem such as few poets, if any, had written before. (Thanks, Charles, for pointing this out, despite the fact that you hate Pound much more than I ever have.) It certainly doesn't "all cohere!"

E.g., Roy Campbell, a fine poet who fought on the Franco side in Spain-as a monarchist rather than a fascist-wrote not only excellent poems of his own (tho some seem as fascist as Pound's) but also good translations of Baudelaire & St. John of the Cross, & in 1952 he published an important study & translation of Lorca.

When I wrote *Words and Ends from Ezra* in the early 1980s, I was fully aware of Pound's fascism & anti-Semitism, but I still found much of his poetry inspiring. I think many of us-especially my younger, language-poet friends-learned very much from Pound. The whole process of juxtaposing disparate elements within the space (in all senses) of a poem was given to us primarily by Pound & his bête noir Stein! (How Ezra'd gnash his teeth at that sentence!)

I think the contributions of the Dadaists & Surrealists to this kind of poem-construction were minor compared to those of Pound.

& he taught many different groups of poets-not only the Imagists, the Objectivists, & the Projectivists-new ways of making poems & of making verse. It's seems incredible when one thinks of the lineages of poem-makers descending from EP, e.g., Pound-Olson-Duncan! Think of all the ears he taught to hear & helped teach-even tho many of us learned as much or more from Stein, & also, in approaching hearing & the putting together of disparate things, Cage's music of the early 1950s).

Would he have been as great a teacher-even to those of us who came to reject as much as we accepted-if he'd not have been such a fucking authoritarian? Probably for some-but that authority thing is what often drives teachers-good & bad.

One cannot obliterate Pound because he was in so many ways a fascist (in so many ways, he wasn't!) or Heidegger because he was a Nazi (for a much much shorter a time than Pound was a fascist). I've recently learned that not only the philosopher amd Jew Hannah Arendt, a lover of Heidegger's as a student who later wrote a major book on totalitarianism, but also Celan, who lost his family to the Holocaust, visited Heidegger in his late years. We cannot be totalists about poets & philosophers any more than we can be about society. Like Whitman, we all contain multitudes.

One way I tried to deal with Pound-in the early 80s-was to make a long poem by reading through The Cantos by a deterministic (nonchance) nonintentional method-the "diastic reading-through text-selection method"-which gleaned from the poem whole words & "ends" of words-everything from the last letter of a word to all the letters except the first-that successively had the letters of "Ezra Pound" in corresponding places (e.g., E's & P's in the first place, Z's & O's in the second place etc). I spelled out the name diastically over & over until I found no more z's. (Thus the last section of the poem is a silence, serendipitously consonant with his long final silence.)

I tried to follow this method out exactly. But, of course, I made mistakes. (A lady in Missoula, Montana wrote me that I'd gotten off the track near the end of the book, tho I was consistent from then on.) Just as Pound had projected a great anticapitalist montage, I attempted to write a completely deterministic nonintentional work by reading through _The Cantos_ and selecting words & ends of words "diastically

I tried to follow this method out exactly, but since I didn't yet have a computer-automation of the method, chance intervened anyway in the shape of mistakes. Luckily, I had decided long before to accept my own mistakes (tho not others'

typos!) once a poem was in print. So I have accepted the fact that Words nd Ends from Ez is a predominantly deterministic poem containing some completely unintended and unsystematic chance interventions (uncaught mistakes of my own). I also accept the fact that others, such as Charles Bernstein, find Words nd Ends from Ez valuable despite its deviations from its intent. (A curious word to use for the project of writing a deterministic nonintentional work!)

I've gone on much too long already. Forgive me, fellow polisters!

From: Pierre Joris

Subject: Pound, fascism, etc.

Bravo for Jerry's & Jackson's messages re Pound: they should lay that question to rest or at least make it clear that one cannot dismiss work of the order of Pound's because of the man's failings. I was about to post Julian Beck's poem, when Jerry did so, as that poem embodies for me the kind of vigilance we should all strive for, as citizens & writers.

Olson said, liberatingly, that space / geography is the essential characteristic of the US, but the unhappy concomitant seems to be a flattening out of history: from the various messages re Pound I get a strong sense of a lack of historical perspective – as if all events were synchronic – so that hindsight gets construed as clarity of vision – & used to condemn those who in their time, the twenties & the thirties, in this case, messed up, aligning themselves with what they perceived as revolutionary positions – on the right & on the left – which both ended in totalitarianisms.

'nuff said, except that for those interested I'd like to point to a few books that can help clarify matters (unhappily as far as I'm aware, they are not translated into English yet):

Jean-Pierre Faye's masterful "Langages Totalitaires" (Hermann, Paris 1973): an analysis of how the discursive modes of national-socialism/ nazism came about, evolved from the various strains of nationalist, socialist, jungdeutsch & many other discourses. A historical semantics that should interest any poet.

Zeev Sternhell, Ni Droite, Ni Gauche: L'ideologie Fasciste en France (Editions du Seuil, 1983, reprinted 1987 by Editions Complexe) There are a number of Sternhell's essays available in English, for ex. "Fascist ideology," in Walter Laqueur, ed. Fascism: A Reader's Guide (UCP, Berkeley 1976). See also his book La Droite Revolutionnaire: Les origines francaises du fascisme 1885-1914 (Seuil 1984).

In the 1930s George Bataille spoke of "the fascist temptation" that the intellectuals & artist of his time had to contend with: some of his work (like the essay on the prefix "sur") are essential reading. Important also is the work done & ongoing around Maurice Blanchot's 30s antisemitic writings (Jeffrey Mehlman's Legacies of Anti-Semitism in France; Alice Yaeger Kaplan's

Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French intellectual life, among others, are important to get a grasp on that period).

As we approach the millennium, making this century "history," we have to keep worrying it, we have to try to understand not only what went wrong, but why & how. It's not a question of either forgetting or forgiving what has happened: we must neither forget nor forgive anything that happened.

From: Charles Bernstein

Subject: Re: reading Pound

What Greek logomachy had in common with the Hebrew poison was debate, dialectic, sophistry, the critical activity that destroys faith. The Hebrew attack, crying out for vengeance, began by destroying the Roman Gods. ... But faith is weakened by debates, [which are] more or less rabbinical and if not rabbinical at least anti-totalitarian.

"Che l'intenzione per ragione vale."

Faith is totalitarian. The mystery is totalitarian. The sacred symbols are totalitarian. The destruction of the images of the Gods did not increase faith. ... That fatal inclination to want to understand logically and syllogistically what is incomprehensible is Hebrew and Protestant.

—Ezra Pound, 1942 (in Meridiano di Roma), qtd by Peter Nicholls in EP: Politics, Economics and Writing

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THUS, in thanks to Jerry, Marjorie, Jackson, Rachel, and the rest of the Poetics "Jews" and Protest-ants (irregardless of ethnic origin) who insist on debating what they/we cannot understand. This is Charles Bernstein speaking ... from the Upper West Side of Manhattan, home of Zabar's and Barney Greengrass, the Surgeon King.

& now for some further sophistry: "the critical activity which destroys faith":

*

Many of the poets and critics who discount Pound do not do so because of his fascism but because of a dislike for collage, parataxis, and the very strikingly rhetorical surfaces of Pound's poems. They also discount other poets, working in related modes, whose politics are quite contrary to Pound's. The converse of this is also true, as the remarkable posts by Rothenberg, Mac Low, and Perloff, among others, have shown. In this context, I don't take the new wave of Pound criticism that regards fascism as central to Pound's poetic project to be a move away from reading Pound or as a way of undermining his significance or

influence. This new Pound criticism, which in some ways incorporates aspects of what has come to be called cultural criticism, or cultural and gender studies, tries to integrate Pound's political and economic ideas with his poetic practice. Like all critical projects, this one is limited. Much of the best Pound criticism before this period tended in various ways to cauterize or surgically remove the cancerous parts of Pound's work, or career, in an attempt to save the good parts. Partly this was a strategy to "save" the work, but it was equally a forceful interpretative system, an "apolitics" of poetry if you will. (Peter Nicholls: "Most previous criticism of [Pound's] work has, from a variety of motives, sought to keep these different strands separate, tending in particular to drive a web between the 'literary' and political dimensions in his writing.")

Starting in the 1980s, critics like Nicholls (a deep lurker on this list), Rachel DuPlessis, Richard Sieburth, Jerome McGann, Burton Hatlen, Bob Perelman, and others, but most militantly Robert Casillo, tried to integrate Pound's political and economic and gender ideologies into the "tropical system" that is his poetry. In doing this, these readers were giving Pound the respect of taking him at his word, in contrast to those critics who, like well meaning relatives, were often forced to say Pound didn't know what he was talking about. The point here is not to say one approach or the other is right but to note that these approaches allow for different readings of Pound's poetry. None of this work, it seems to me, ought to drive one from reading Pound; quite on the contrary. (Possibly this may be the work of a distinctly younger generation of scholars who no longer felt that raising these issues aligned their views with those who roundly dismissed Pound in the postwar period; this earlier polarization pushed those who went to the defense of Pound's poetry to avoid dwelling on the relation it has to his politics and views on money.)

Casillo and Sieburth actually brought me back to reading Pound; that is, reading through the fascism and masculinism brought me from a passive, largely unarticulated, aversion to Pound, to an active, and ongoing, interest in all aspects of his work. Certainly I have been polemical in my essays on Pound, but not without the ironic realization that Pound relished just this sort of poetic polemicism. Reading Pound through the fascism means reading Pound in the most specific social and historical terms. It also means reading poetic forms politically, as an economy of signs; it means thinking through the implications of poetic structures, rather than imagining them ever to be neutral or transparent. A poem including history means we must read the history too, and this history is writ in the style, in the symbolic/semiotic economy of the poem, in the material means of production, as much as in Pound's "disembodied" "ideas" – a matrix of material meanings that Christine Froula so brilliantly calls

"The Pound Error": error as much in Joan Retallack's sense of typos and errancy as in political misjudgment: it's all there.

Poetry is not worth reading because it is comfortable or happy or understandable or uplifting, any more than history or philosophy is. Nor does reading for a politics of poetic form mean that forms are liberating; more often we find, as Ray DiPalma once wrote, that "all forms are coercive". If one starts with the assumption that a poetry should be truthful or beautiful, that it's meaning should transcend the circumstances of its production – then of course talk of the politics of Pound's poetic forms will seem dismissive of Pound's work, since it pulls that work down from the heights of poetic vanity into the real-politics of the actual poem in actual history.

People say, Pound was deluded, Pound was insane, Pound was paranoid, Pound was delusional, as a way to explain away, or possibly contextualize, his fascism. I don't doubt this, but it doesn't get me anywhere. Fascism itself was (IS) delusional and paranoid, and Hitler and Mussolini and Goebbels are certifiable in my book, as are the shouting Brown Shirts pictured in *Triumph of the Will* (don't we call this "mass hysteria"?). [Highly recommended, in this context, is the recent documentary on Riefenstahl, "The Wonderful, Horrible World of Leni Riefenstahl".] I agree with Pierre Joris that what's important to understand as we approach the end of this long century is the nature of this delusion, of this insanity, that has attracted so many otherwise admirable, sometimes brilliant, people, groups, indeed cultures. Of course Pound was delusional during the period of his Radio Speeches; reading Pound means reading through these delusions, trying to come to terms with them. It doesn't mean that in making these judgments one is free of one's own delusions, or that such a reading gives a complete account of this poetic work, which demands multiple, contradictory, readings.

Pound was not just a fascist; he had different politics, and poetics, at different points in his life and even at some of the same points. Nicholls notes that from 1930 to 1937, Pound was eager to keep a dialogue open with the American Left; and earlier in his life his views seemed more Left than Right, although, reading Nicholls, one begins to see this as much as a weakness in the Life/Right distinction as an inconsistency on Pound's part. Nicholls also shows that "perhaps the most disquieting thing about [Pound's] savage propaganda is that it was to some degree an extension of ideas that had governed the earlier Cantos." Indeed, Nicholls's tracings of the (de?)evolution of the practice of "authority" and "ideological closure" in Pound's work is crucial for understanding a fundamental dynamic of modernism.

Yet Pound's poetry is never simply a direct reflection of his politics; indeed, I would argue quite to the contrary that Pound's work contradicts his fascism. The fascist reading of Pound's poetic practice is valuable as one approach; it is not a final or definitive reading; as with all critical methods, it illuminates some issues while obscuring others. Of course, as Casillo's book and other Pound criticism shows, it also may push the criticism to the polemical and even hysterical, as if the critic feels she or he is wrestling with a demon more than interpreting a poem. This too needs to be historicized and contextualized before it can be judged.

Pound told Allen Ginsberg he suffered from "that stupid, suburban prejudice of antisemitism", as if he should have been immune from such a low, "suburban" consciousness. But one thing that is notable about Pound is that he does not appear to have been "personally" antisemitic, which would have been in no way unusual for a person of his generation and background. His attacks on Jews are not related to his hatred of individual Jews or his desire to be a member of an "exclusive" country club. His views of Jews are highly theoretical and structural, projecting Jewishness, more than individual Jews, as the core force in the destruction of the most cherished values of the West. This demonization is not a "stupid suburban prejudice", it is the systematic paranoia-producing ideology that has come to be called by the fascism. (Burton Hatlen: "we will all seriously misunderstand fascism if we insist on seeing it as a "right-wing" political movement. For fascism ... blended an authoritarianism usually associated with the 'right' and a 'populism' usually characteristic of the 'left' .") Marjorie Perloff is quite right to point to it in Buchanan and the fundamentalist right; they too have gone well beyond "stupid suburban prejudice", even as they bank on it. It is scary to see the degree to which fascist ideas have rooted themselves so deeply in mainstream American life, often in the guise of family values and consonance with a natural order. Pound's most fascist polemics resonate in an eerie way with the current wave of attacks on the arts, gays, the disenfranchised poor, immigrants, feminism, and the cities. I say this because there is often a tendency among Americans to exoticize fascism; Pound did his best to bring it home.

There are any number of fascist writers who are of virtually no interest to many or probably any of us on this list. And there are virulent antisemites like Celine, whose work I like more than is comfortable to say, but which I don't find as structurally and "tropically" rich in terms of the sort of issues I am raising here.

Pound's work, it seems to me, not only allows for but provokes an ideological reading; it insists that it be read, form and content, for its politics and its ideas.

And it is precisely this that is one of the enduring values of his work. The dystopian aspects of Pound's work are important to fully explore, even with tempers flying off the page, because he is a fundamental part of that elective tradition (thinking of Christopher Beach's useful sense of Pound's influence in his *ABC of Influence: Ezra Pound and the Remaking of American Poetic Tradition*) that, as Beach and others have noted, consists mostly of poets whose politics and economics differ so radically from Pound's. But the more important Pound is for that tradition, then the more important it is to understand the disease that consumes his work, which cannot be disentangled from what is "good" about it. Nicholls, for example, notes how Pound's insistence on "making it new" made for an affinity with related fascist ideals. The significance of "the Pound tradition" requires that we interrogate it for what it excludes as much as what it makes possible: interrogate the assumptions of poetic lineages not just to acknowledge their effects but also to counteract their effects. (Perhaps one aspect of this elective tradition is a commitment to difficult writers and difficult writings; after spending some weeks lately writing about Laura (Riding) Jackson, that possibility is hard to miss.)

Marjorie urges us to "begin at home" with our political concerns, to look around at what is happening in 1996 in America. Given the context of her own life experience, her warning is all the more ominous, all the more to be headed. But also, I would say, I hope within the spirit of her wake-up call, but also in the spirit of "debate", that in the context of this Poetics list, taking on Pound's fascism is also a way of starting at home.

From: Dick Higgins

Subject: Web Poetry, Restructuring Language Arts Departments

Nice to see the POETICS network's so quiet. Gives a body time to ruminate and then say what one has been thinking of. With me it is two things:

1) On the poetics network I would have thought I would see speculations on the present state of literature instead of this constant assertion that this or that is a fine book. Try this: we have seen many explanations of the mess in our literary publishing—high paper costs, poor distribution, a declining economic base of independent stores, lack of widely read news media coverage, etc. With thirty million people or so on the web and capable of getting e-mail and the number growing towards perhaps a quadrupling of that number, e-mail publishing and e-zines are bound to become a more significant factor than they have been, since putting up a web site is cheap. Furthermore, many of those who might otherwise buy books are now buying hardware and software to get onto the web, so that a downturn in book sales can and must be expected at least short term, that aggravating an already difficult situation for the serious book-selling and book-publishing public. We who are "on-line" can access a good site and print out what we like, thus providing ourselves almost for free with good reading matter (assuming one does not wish to read on the screen itself). Leaving aside for now the related questions of how to pay and support the publisher and writer, one wonders what are some characteristics of works which function well on the web? For example, time seems to behave differently in web poems than in on-paper ones. One is impatient to download, one must read in two stages—do I like this text enough to download it, and now I can see it, do I want to keep it? I worry about the cost of being connected to my server (the economic angle), and I can only see one screen-ful at a time. How does poetic language (including visual-poetic language) function in such a context? With TTS (= "text to sound") becoming ever more sophisticated and less expensive, therefore more available, the silent web has already begun to be replaced by the talking web. Already I have been invited to submit poetry by myself and my Left Hand Books friends to a "poetry reading on the web." If such a site can be seen in France, Thailand and Brazil, what does this do to the very concept of national literatures? Is it a form of cultural imperialism or is it a force for building the world literary community? Or both? What will all this mean to us as writers, scholars and thinking human beings?

2) On our POETICS NETWORK there is so much academic professionalistic babble that I've found it hard to think about poetics. It has also made me think, as I haven't in years, about how in an ideal world the education of people in our language arts would be structured. Try this: scrap all English and Comp Lit departments. Create two other kinds of departments in their place: Departments of Literature and Literary History (parallel to those in Art and Art History) and Departments of Language Skills (for linguistics, technical, journalistic, English for non-native speakers, basic grammars and remedial writing, etc.). Such a reorganization would allow for the clearing out of the dead wood, retaining the vital and ultimately serve the students and public far better and more realistically than the present set of assumptions does. For example, the present system sets up too many boundaries among English, other languages and social structures in our literary canons. The real world knows no such bounds. Goethe's dictum that "All literature is world literature" applies, especially now. I can read German poems, medieval texts, works by women and blacks, works with which I do not agree and so on and make of them my own; under the present structures, were I to be in academia, I could not share my thoughts about them. "That's not in your department," I would be told "Don't invade his-or-her territory or you won't get tenure or you'll have to take early retirement." I would therefore be unable to share what was really on my mind and would have to keep my mouth shut. How well I remember Joel Oppenheimer telling me, many years ago when he was teaching, that he hated not being able to teach Wordsworth because he was supposed to focus on teaching his students to write poems! This should change. Perhaps those who are concerned about these matters, in and out of academia, should start a campaign to cause such a restructuring to become normative.

We have no time for resentments (presumably we all hate change, especially since we are all so busy and overworked, both in and out of academia). Rather, these are both issues, I believe, which we must consider if we are not all to wind up in the dustbin while the outside world looks for others to deal with these questions.

Seriously everybody—how about it?