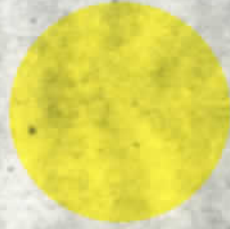
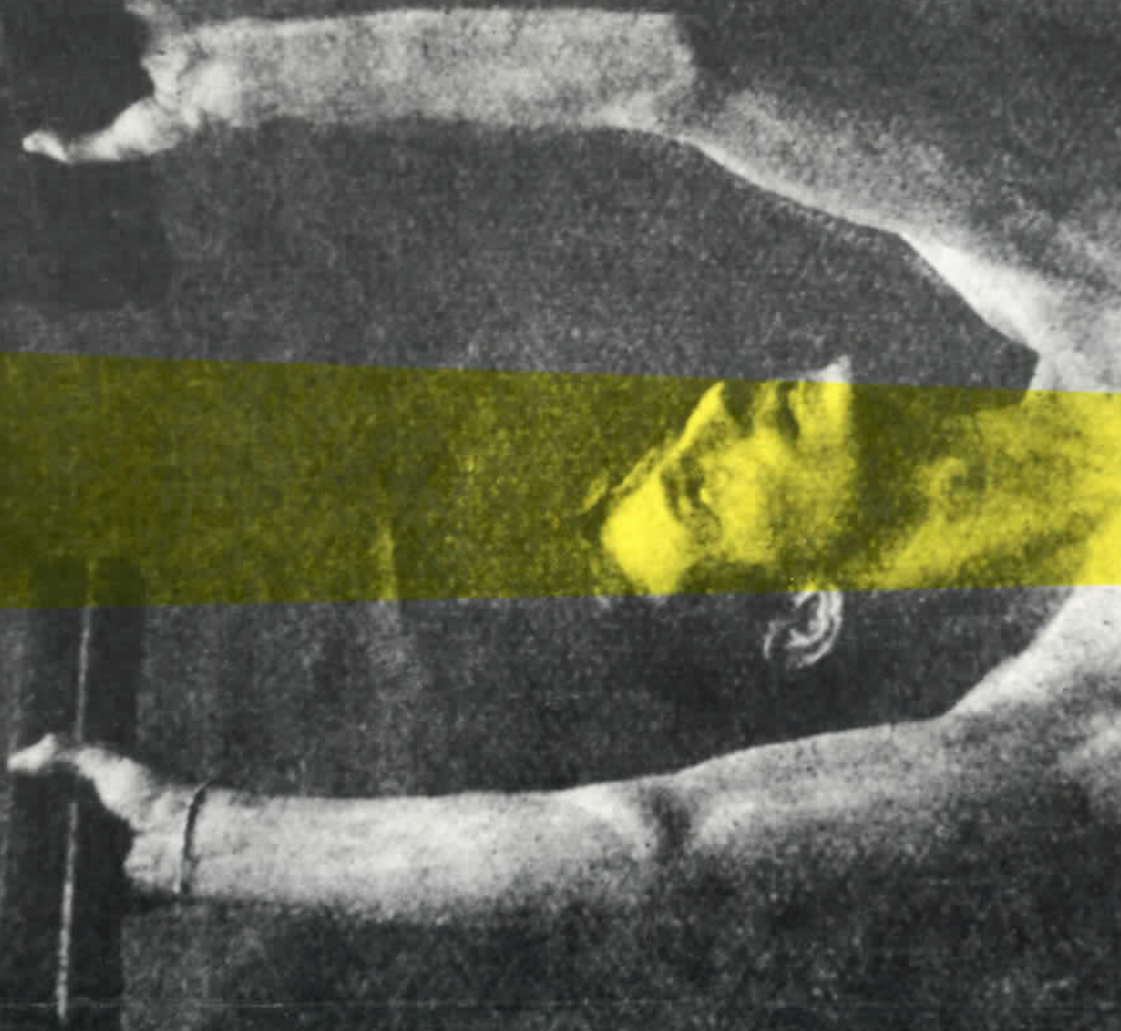


WRITING



23/24

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FALL/WINTER 1989

23/24

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CONTENTS

• FROM: HOUSEWORKS Kathryn MacLeod	7
• FROM: DEMOCRACY ASSEMBLAGES Andrew Levy	13
• CLOSE TO NAKED Gerald Creede & Nancy Shaw	18
• FIST OF THE COLOSSUS Carla Harryman & Tom Mandel	23
• FROM: METROPOLITAN CORRIDOR Ray DiPalma	42
• THREE POEMS David Sternbach	48
• MODEL FOR MATTER Deanna Ferguson	55
• POEM Julia Steele	58
• OPTIMISM AND CRITICAL EXCESS (PROCESS) Charles Bernstein	62
• A TEXT Christine Davis	90
• COVER Kelly Wood	

FROM: HOUSEWORKS

K a t h r y n M a c L e o d

Collapse of the neutral
The cassette years after puberty

Broken cars, abandoned houses:
He says this is their ideology
they have no respect

The way the neighbour reads the garden
every evening in his tweed jacket:
a) production
b) outland

Beginning white, basic faces and ideas repeat
All the history outside of language
You disarm yourself by replication
(Surviving by manipulation)

and mother, having said very little up to that point

They spread and sweetened a belief in continuity
(our evolution, progress singing, enamel ovenware)

You tell the stories of your childhood but can't recall
colours size or age
only descending lines of power

she says unflinching horizontal
safety

monument

about a gallon and a half of tar
the smell and

difficulty

keeping the place in order, the way
you like it, sympathetic

collections of desire, becoming the good Indian
a clean, clock and attribute

(the furniture correctly)

they are professionally violent
regulations, closet sex and naming breeds

we gave up our real names
alive in mirrors and the movies

(arranged and displayed)

the privacy of this repression,
it almost makes one
clit and dick, the language
has to be believed to see

the man's body hit the lamppost ten feet in the air

you want to lick the skin, you can't remember
not to

sweat, lizard on pavement, out for a businessman's lunch

two voices in the head at once
Once behind the vacuum cleaner
she reaches economic independence

A slow death by personality
the extra brain
in his bottom end

She tried to articulate
a world before dinosaurs

Always the failure of the artist
starving for financial attention

In the same way the creek was rerouted
so the whiteman's orchards might survive

an entire section of the population
concerned about waterbeds

and electrical fences
gained easy acceptance

That was the last we saw of the stegosaurus
It is still necessary to abort
the female

Having the family hierarchy for dinner, one interpretation

After establishing
rules of entry
we deem it necessary

to set a good example, speaking correctly
with many tongues, collecting the best
ideologically, so to speak

Polite, not overbearing, fixtures

How much your favourite author drinks
a child

suspended

the lily spectre of the world, the edge
of sexual definition, something like a mud fence

I believe
becoming over being
and read exactly what the famous read

obsessed/english/expensive/information up the ass

Beside us always, the pits of the indecent
A field of bunch grass
before the empires of old men
like clockwork

speaking to their wives re:
dinner, winter, take a holiday

How a city might kill you
as faces repeat meaningfully
in downtown crowds: extinct, extinct

All the panic of romantic
A clever rhyme and clapping game
(her knees like rubber balls in stockings)

Another way: the stretch of land across the river,
the reserve dotted with prefab buildings, over the new
highway a new bridge connecting empty fields

This is indifference of meaning
(his head swallowed in a metal bowl)
which was enough light
to measure progress

and why the children grow up
at incorrect angles

Towards a butter
Being younger, clawing
middle of a road
game exactly so-so
bitter System
the chaise game
cough it up and death

finally Swears it

truth the good ones
sweatered into race time
not so serious bargain Began
along a fine chain store
rebuked winsome appliance
as particularly racist
avocado range

the Merchants lurching

when do I get time
to liberalize, decide
the low-ceiling approach
too political to ever peak
your own mind Vacation
plus the aunt and uncle

early novels/early menstruation

correcting the Old Boys'
ties to match magnificence
ice and soft sex
the good red skin an obvious
way to decimate
aboriginal sleep, cheap paint
the laundry not quite dry

who's on the fritz

FROM: DEMOCRACY ASSEMBLAGES

Andrew Levy

Books

it is unthinkable to look for it personally
intellectual labour

able to pour out the beggar
their incomparable fate

Nowadays, they no longer sleep at all
what you call unreason

dead serious

the closing present consensus

grapple factors to couch neglect

model the nomad's

claim

I'll try to tack you down tomorrow

the independent continuation of my

inspirations

shapes that are not yet fully themselves

makes flame an arrangement

hidden and alive

walking the hill going places

that cannot be duplicated

in conformity with mine

the place through which you look

hard to discern very clearly

all the details

as if they were alive

are nevertheless as if at someone

else's house

outside, in the presence of the sea

they go on mumbling, mumbling

to indulge our

contented people

Dioxin & other Pollutants

define cultural work
flesh of fish
cars
their space be gone!
you staying think to seldom
conceive of
social media
nearness and penetration
possession one learns too much namelessness
mountain run-off driving me wild
who really mattered to destroy us
food is not the enemy?
mouths forming . . . I'm not with them
I am what solicits and separates
turning intricate and slow like an empty beach
you catch plastic-filled policy
in the street
private demand cancels Vanderburgh County
where he grew up
the motionless buildings of New York City
empty and fragile
numerous as shells
what I named without restraint
held
a wave rolled toward you
the slow breathing penned
within its heaviness
so deceptively artificial

Shadows Descend on Western Windows

a new layer of dust flecked with fingertips
every day and every hour
for the writing of poetry
against captivity that it dies throwing itself
repeatedly at one point to no apparent effect
I would not altogether trust thrust
Why is she being so silly?
Real idiots in the clinical sense are a
godsend
the seed from which
the world of love with all its pains
We who have lived through the great era of license
for someone to be faithful so that
the candidates might admire their bottomless depths
lamentations about a "nonmeeting"
there is no longer any place on earth for a human being
the uncertain future, self-induced
passionately in love, blotted out by complacency
from noon till night
retail fog in a copse or grove fitted with doors
he means a shopping-mall, such laws
resemble
the "noise of time"
there could be no common language
between them

Art in America

they think they have an unlimited supply
I wonder what the man is doing
I mean really doing
to get away from the arguments
between young Marxist rabble and
crafty professors
intellectual explications can no longer
discover amnesia
Rockefeller plans to develop seventy percent
of the World
mountains made of their desires brush away this
weary world
the course shows but faintly
yet the withering is distinct
She waited till she heard the old
boy's door close
the voice you hear repeats phrases to avoid
the chair
I cannot explain why myself
you want another child brought on down articulate
one who knows distances when she
discovers your heart
in the background the surging abyss?
the grass miles away on the sky

You Can't Catch Me

travel from the periphery to the periphery
I've got to get out of the sun
the rooms fresh cigarettes compress
into a fire at the center
maybe to avoid the drought
write clues to
the pain of separating being together
lovers in revolt an irony
certain brightness on their seeds of glare thought
what did he say?
fusion preparing for influence
just stay, hold
already the walls turn worlds
absolutely meaningless
full so shit to be answered here
more than just a comfortable
danger, intention
another twist he's got going
in that discrete kind of relationship
get down beyond the me
fear of open-heartedness
composition
not of use
little symbolic things which are
huge for you

No movement in the sky but smoke and birds. He can't get his coat off fast enough to turn around. Dramatic rescue, insular tragedy. A slave to medic sin. Are you experts? Have you ever been experts? A soprano collapses and the opera calls a time out.

Around the next block. We always hung out in someone else's neighbourhood. Funny weather for ice cream. Raindrops on roses and whiskers on killers. Frantic tactics around midnight. Swimming in the hot sun, a mixture of bitten cork. Through a time, some play music. Cheery chords.

Figuring through the garden in a rare burst of eloquence. Someone special is waving so you must become less tearful. Next to the man with the top hat. Through the front glass. Porcelain rain.

Eliminating possibilities before they occur. They did their exercises in a public park before they were killed. This is the image being projected at home and abroad. He hallucinates breasts on silhouettes. Under eave is attic. He is to french. Just as a rolled futon is a sleep cache.

He'd had enough of intrigue. A movie night, a barbecue, a mixed dance. It had stopped wondering him. He called running the perimeter of grade school recess, 'mingling with the guests.' All the closeups are body doubles.

A touching pitch is his amplified version. Instead of going out by the side door, suddenly he clasped the girl to him and pressed a kiss upon her. From which angle and from which direction. Every house is full of things. In a second sitting, tea and biscuits on the front porch. Sketches of skyline are never as good as the blueprints were. Delightful as it may be.

He lazed on the porch, hung like a house, spills spit and spume onto her blouse. No doubt the two of them had been seen together in the wood. Her father had then invented this fairy tale of his suicide so as to account for their rendez-vous. She tipples awhile nipple rock lull. The rival bounds through the fence in a fit rare in elegance.

She wondered an intruder of outgrowth. An apparent orphan. A blouse, abuse, a pose, aroused, something on paper. Kick out the raspberries. Kick out the plum. She spread her hands in the drawer and parted the red socks.

Down the next block three men stand. Looking toward us, we wait. Lips that touch service. This water's gone off. The thigh bone's connected to the cook pot. How long does it take for the next step, and please wait until the last call. His stiffened self-control rivaled all artifice. An observed luring frankness.

He was waiting until it got nicer and he could show off his shirt sleeves. Gets up, freefalls from the top bunk. Rosin from the Sandman. But the trouble had already begun, the boys spent more time in the bar than in jail. A near miss. Every time he moves his head he adjusts the balance.

She had been made an accomplice to the affair. Always toward the fences greener time. Often bullies on the edge of the extension, undaunted, in the sun. We were just two poor wretches who gave one another comfort. If he had a good time getting there, it didn't have to be good when he got there.

Sounds like an allegory that crowd stunned in the skyline and a hungrier child would have found out her parents were poor sooner. The older children were obedient and the younger better made, doors best left closed. Seize nature.

In another round of advice my hand awaits its forfeiture. In return objects strained. He dealt a club to his face card, losing with 23. This is something we have trouble hearing in another tradition.

From the kitchen window, the patio, the back fence. Like a diagram of the inner ear. Family scrambled. Nuptial ritual. Anal nape plan.

But what of the unfortunate gorgeous? In the old family neighbourhood, others watch faithfully. Someone is waiting. The sugar falls from the slit in the box slow as time sand. An index to the second lines. A wise decision.

And now only numbered glances across the view. Certain to undone. Vertical is certain. Whore is optional. Usually in June, though, their daughters would marry. Film tactics. Hankies. Her father, a man of some perspicacity, guessed that the girl had no serious suicidal intentions.

Almost always we were called to the view. In the privacy of my own rent I suspect the rip in tenancy. Sperm spills, a dull lanolin squirt in a cornucopia apparition. The penis was shaped like $\frac{1}{3}$ of Zorro's signature. His words did not always tally with his animosity. "Get in by sundown or . . ." Or this guy clear and cloudless.

Biting off bits of cork and spitting them in the toilet bowl, buoy of spunk afloat in scum, low cal, skim. Full natal penetration. A gesture of doing.

At the corner store the older kids told us: "The lonely die alone and the loved, poor and attended." Could the kiss have taken place in this way. The gaps were to be found in her memory. Sundown and sunset. The late sun. An off-hand jerk off.

Zealous reformers at the community centre seemed to bask in the suspicion that they might be. With heels to the ground, their nakedness was a detail. The illusion of brilliance and suspense. A roll of quarters in his shorts pocket. Confronted with regimentation at the entrance of a crowded enclosure. No explanations were in order. Unreasonable melancholy . . . this brightly coloured pill.

A gift for concealing facts, with nothing so self-considered. He had covered the distance that had made his return impossible. I can see from the light shining through your rib cage that you've a fine skeleton. Out of sight, out of jail. The stigmata of sensibility. A maraschino cherry in the hot sun. Wait for September? Whore is ontological. Whore is until.

I hear lazy fans shunt imaginary air, the office laden with waiting, the exchange desultory and tropical. Autonomously. Propaganda work is

now compulsory. After you're treated as a whore so long, you get casual about how you dress. She uses nail polish to gum up a run, a caustic arousal. He'd as lief take his chances in the past. Powder is reasonable and talc is cheap. They don't open it to finger, they open it to show. It can get in anything air can get in. The map of three oil spills went into effect. Lips that touch Icarus. That's why they carried rods in their top hats. If you got hepatitis you could claim to have been swimming in the river.

The delight he takes of observation, its suggestion of escape, innuendo. He enjoyed his parents' wedding pictures because he didn't know them yet and they looked like nice people. Below this quasi-subterranean stream. Alluring — a vague and modest idea of himself as a legendary frame. An inexplicable contempt, counting somewhere in the back of his mind. Usually in June, on the edge of greener times.

Concocted, encroached, circled. She wore a green dress in this socialist spring of reasonable doubt. They gathered in front of the camera, allies on the lake to commemorate black patent. The crash is a tragic part of this community. They perished together, three years into the mandate, cured to celebrate the death of two martyrs. Two of their fellow fighters.

To be embraced or sustained by the light-green, hoisted to the short portages. Upstairs reunions. Close up, close to naked, accosted arousal. You might have seen him naked, standing on the shoulder, waiting for a chance to cross. The police took his pulse as they drove by.

In exploring the circumference of an inner window he detected two moles. A no-frills operation. Dress shields in the forefront of battle. In time they'll just vanish. Body double. Voice over.

He had signed nothing, vowed nothing, pledged nothing. Full and forward. Don't pass out — put out. From the backroom window it is clear and cloudless. Then he covers the distance that makes his return impossible. The illusion of brilliance and suspense. A stab is the gesture, not the knife, or the cut. Buoyant, full afloat.

He had a fortunate childhood in that though reading was his closest comfort it wasn't his only one. To become a national obsession, complete with good guys, bad guys and fallen heroes. Enough lessons

to swim out of reason. He made a tent on his lumpy bed by tucking one end of a threadbare sheet under the far end of the mattress and the other end up over the headboard letting the flannel fall away like canvas flaps, pegging it with ruined slippers between the paint-splattered wall and fractured wood under which he read (coaxing the dying bulb on a rusty flashlight), novels that nurtured middle-class emotions he didn't yet know he had no right to. In her estimation there were a lot of fine memories, a common presence. On the last day the buwley bugs skittered up the headpost. On these grounds, he could avoid damaging publicity.

Interrogated, but not held in violation. Paving every kilo of secondary road. These are dirty words in the oil patch. The wish built into the library. A decade of lean and mean; over-regulated, undermotivated. It is nothing less than the creation of the world's largest painting.

On the cornerstone of the community centre, while the cement was still wet, some kid had written Fuck God and drew a heart around it. He just said he heard it, he didn't say he believed it. He used the cup she used a few days before finally washing it. While the cement was still yet. And another drink without courage. He wants to make certain, (he wants to kill a little time).

He once whaled in the arctic. I was in my room, it wasn't me. There is only one logical answer . . . a new era in aporatic history. A commitment to detail. Shining face, stunning force. A flat form for everything. You can't afford the luxury of previous experience. The imposter may be identified by the scratches on his face. I've lost my will apparently in double.

FIST OF THE COLOSSUS

Carla Harryman & Tom Mandel

(The protagonists enter, one of them by ship.)

Cla: I'm leaning over the bridge now, but in ten months I'll be happy — I'll have forgotten the great ideas I got while gambling the evening-long away.

Tm: What is this great big piece of concrete?

Cla: The first time I saw concrete like that, I thought: "Wow, that must be a ten dollar chip discarded by some disconsolate high roller — grown, swollen in the surf." But, now I'm sure it's antique. Do you think first impressions are generally the most accurate?

Tm: You mean like first impression best impression? Or first impressions last? A great thinking work once told me, "I could do that, but it would be wrong." *(Aside.)* When first I saw her she was a morose sportswoman, drinking hard as nails.

Cla: *(Overhearing.)* I thought you were looking at a tree in that alley behind the freeway because you needed a break from your desk work. It's not like I'm walking around considering what your impressions are. I suppose one could invent a drama around reacting to what I think you think it is. Now you're going to say how easy it is to imagine one whose fist, cracked off and fallen into a hundred feet of water . . .

Tm:

... is dragged up later and denied by Melina Mercury. Tonight has been golden; I can't say whether the handkerchief I feel in my pocket may not really be a napkin I picked up, folded and then forgot — full of the chloroform of choral form. Would you be offended if I took this off? It's a present from the doctor.

Cla:

It's not real is it?

Tm:

Oh, no. It looks too large and heavy to be real. Do you think it's just pigment?

Cla:

There seems to be a crowd gathering here. We must have become part of it while we were talking. Now we're in a picture. A big hand pours a vat of honey over this special surface. Ice is forming on the background and people are marching down the mountain. They seem to be fleeing the cold, but instead they are about to enter our scene. Is it a military scene? I don't know if I want to keep seeing things this way, with a delayed reaction. It's too much like going to the doctor. You and I never introduced ourselves. You aren't a doctor are you?

Tm:

I'm a man under a desk trying to collate the branches and leaves. I'm not sure I heard you right, did you say ice hockey or ice honey? We just passed an executive with a pip of time management. What an effort to move! Maybe if we dance we'll fall into the harbor mating scene.

Cla:

I really like a malleable slang in a man.

(The protagonists embrace each other and dance. Their shadow resembles them in the vague way a shortcut resembles a reference you seem to remember but are too tired to look up.)

Basket enters, bouncing.)

Bkt:

Basket says, stop that boy talk. Then Basket says "first impressions." Then Basket says I knew how long that relationship would last at first sight, but I ignored myself because I didn't want to be bored. Basket found these sentences in a kiosk in a box of magazines. Basket is restless in Rhodes.

Tm:

I don't believe I answered you. I'm not a doctor, but I do know rain when it leaks through my basket.

Cla:

Funny, I always thought any time could last forever, and now the crowds are thinning. Maybe it's just the rain. The cafés sure look warm.

Bkt:

Basket says: a puppet wants a drink — what do you say?

Tm:

When you say "could last forever," do you mean forever unobserved?

(The protagonists disappear with Basket looking for an entrance and are replaced temporarily by Victorian-looking automatons whose hobby is to imitate human genre dramas of the twentieth century. They lose what they call their 'naturalized' [i.e. 'humanized'] appearance[s] when they forget to dine regularly on meat.)

(The Doctor enters on nose and knees.)

Doctor:

Please, I must play through. Let me putt! I have an operation to perform. Tell me is there a bathroom nearby?

(Automaton points majestically. Doctor hurries off.)

Automatons kindle a small fire and pensively place their arms in the flames. Phlegmatic pause. Pleasant smell of grilling automaton.)

Scene II

(There is an intimacy among Automatons that is not so very quiet. A migrant worker, too, is unaware of this week's special, Netman-Marcus.)

Aut. 1:

You know our boss would probably like us to get some rest. But I like it here under the open skies. It makes me feel like making a move.

Aut. 2:

I don't think our boss thinks about us anymore.

Aut. 1: Yeah, but we're still thinking about him, so I guess it comes out even. What's that yellow stuff in the jar?

Aut. 2: Mustard. Do you want some?

Aut. 1: I thought it was tempera paint. Of course I don't want any. I'm just keeping tabs. I may have to give an account of this, you know!

Aut. 2: As for myself, I don't feel like making a move, unless we could drive a convertible. But that's just a thought, don't mind me. Really, I'm happy where I am. Comfortable where I am.

Aut. 1: That's fine with me. You sit here, and I'll sit next to you and map out some tours.

(Enter Protagonists, and Be Prepared.)

Tm: Oh what a wonderful evening! Rhodes smells a little like Rome tonight, a cross between wisteria and scourge. I'm probably just getting homesick.

(Exit Protagonists.)

Aut. 2: Those two look like a boy and girl I've seen before.

Aut. 1: You sure are gender conscious. I can't stand to figure out who's what. It hurts to think like that. I remember people by singling them out in my mind, like I see the individual against a background of bougainvillaea, and then when I see them again, I figure out if I'd recognize them against a background of bougainvillaea.

(Enter Protagonists.)

Tm: Bargain villas, I'd say. Just look at that glorious dump! What an island, water everywhere. Are we near our pensione? Look, a festival. Can you read their banner? I think it says "Torero by Moro." "Tom-or-o . . ."

Cla: Moro's a local wig. But, what do you think "Tom-or-o" means?

Tm: I'm sure there's some hopeful gloss.

(Enter the Doctor.)

Doctor: Some distension and to fix on it I'm thinking. Sorry ladies, but from ideas I seem your English. Myself, of this island. Can be of service? I studied at Oxford, which was mostly sanding. The large puppets are my pupils as we were. What do you say we take in their patient play?

(Guided by the Doctor, the protagonists gingerly approach the Automations as they play.)

Scene III

(Protagonists seated, lashed back to back.)

Cla: *(Thoughtfully and with pauses during which attention turns the other cheek.)* Dressed up. I'm getting to that part. By now I'm sure I've lost touch with everything I knew was true this morning. Somebody on the ship told me that the local sky deepens in color as night approaches. First it's dark blue, then peach black, and the stars are arranged in lots of suggestive shapes. Although the stars are far away, their shapes appear touchable — near, *molto eidelico!* And even when you don't look at them, they're as hot over your head as a hairweaving wand. Still, my guess is it's an archipelago they see, not stars, a wide curve studded with islands and veiled in the clouds of their own local temperament. Vast waters wash the shores to which the island's wooded hills descend. The cats here are all called "Schatzie" or "Schazii." And they all move in a single sense, as if within a natural amphitheater that extends its base toward the sea where arriving steamers hop up the harbor. Oh, how would I know anyway! All I ever spent was one morning in touristic illusion. First you rub the body in grease and hit the beach. That part of travel is a bore if you're not attentive to the detail others put into it. Then you look at

the idyll mass and see within it countless unique signatures . . . it's like snow. And when I say temperament, really! I think I must have bought mine in a souvenir market like one of those dark, wooden things you take home, for which no purpose can be identified and to which a single memory attaches, a memory that won't be dislodged and which wipes away any other response you might have had to whatever it was you were doing. I tell you, it's just like the poet says — "Turisma miasma est." And like snow, it's wonderful . . . wonderfully . . . formal really.

Tm: Excuse me if I'm interrupting, but is this a conversation? Lavish vignettes embedded in pure poundage? Or a mental example of you packing the wrong clothes for the vacation of your life? Maybe we should consider our current predicament.

Cla: Stop fishing out your propensities, and I'll stop trying to outrun you.

Tm: I'm not going to forgive you for that! Your soliloquies won't slick down our disarray.

Cla: You express yourself exotically. I realize the mess we're in. Damn that fist anyway!

Tm: (*Consolingly.*) Just think of it as a mosquito.

Cla: As tourists, our status has been lowered; we're trivialized within ourselves and we're probably stuck together like this to give each other strength. What happens in the mind doesn't make us important even if we are witnesses. Is that what we are?

Tm: Who cares who's pulling on the other tin can? As long as the string's pulled tight.

Cla: I'll make you know who's there. Not some elegant vignette packer either!

Tm: Don't be disputatious. We came here to have a good time.

Cla: Then tell me what you make of this doctor fellow. He looks like he'd come up at midnight, with all his faith in a bleached-out spot.

Tm: Yes, I know what you mean.

Cla: (*Conspiratorial whisper.*) That pistolotto you picked up at Universal, where is it?

Tm: (*Responds in a normal tone of voice.*) I don't know, but I bet we can get some rocks and sticks from those dudes over there by the little fire. How do we get out of these ropes? Hey, dudes! Hey, over there! We need help.

(*The Automations, however, have other plans.*)

Aut. 1: "Jay carried his wounded brother Matt through the wintry town square filled with the troops of the Russian occupation. There was not a more cold-hearted one on earth than Tillie who followed out of curiosity. Fred followed her for fear of being followed by her. The gladiator pulled change out of his pocket and wept. While this heterogeneous tail of the otherwise military parade bopped along out of sync, the townsfolk hid in the empty cornfields. Smoke from their pipes rose out of the fields like locusts swarming missiles. A woman of unusual build and strength rolled over one of the small, random fires, and put it out. The cornfields cheered. The woman put another one out in the same way. She rose, her skin and house-dress covered in ash and dirt. Fred was in a frenzy. He wanted to fuck Tillie. He put a hand down the back of her pants. She turned to him, kicked him in the nuts and resumed her position in the parade." Is that the kind of thing you mean?

Aut. 2: I think they're wiggling out of the ropes.

Aut. 1: It was meant to be, I guess.

Aut. 2: How so? They're calling us. This could be important. I thought they were dummies, but they're real!

Aut. 1: The meat loaf is done. How big a piece do you want?

Cla: Wait a minute, do we really want a perfect stranger to come into camp and disrupt our cluster? Shouldn't we be separate from all this stuff we can't grasp. Can I talk you out of yelling? I'll sing you a song:

Facts don't matter
when you're having fun,
sit back and relax.
Let the facts pass.

By the way, I don't think there's much to complain about in being tied to someone so savvy. . . .

Tm: Effortless of you to say so! Are your hands sweaty?
(*Struggles loose from the ropes.*) Let's blow this houdini shack, or no . . . maybe we should make believe we're still stiff — help me persuade myself.

(*Protagonists shake off ropes.
Automaton stands over them, watching.*)

Aut. 1: I bet you're hungry, boss. We've got meat loaf. I saved you some.

Cla: Thanks, I'm not hungry.

Tm: Well I am! Say, you're friendly. Don't mind my amigo; he rarely grazes with the herd. You know the type, "one hand on the banister; the other holds a canister . . ." This looks just like Mom's loaf, back-o'-the-hand food. (*Aside.*) Maybe we should make a break for it.

Aut. 2: Isn't there anything you'd like to ask me, boss?

(*Basket enters.*)

Bkt: Basket tells everybody what's going on. This is what's going on: the boy walks up some steps. The girl relaxes. It's quite practical. And there are few followers. But those that there are are dining. Spiders from the sand dune are envious. The boss is one of them. He knows what's going

on. They all do and that makes them envious. But not the girl and the boy.

(*The Protagonists confer hurriedly.*)

Tm: All this excitement has given me foot bloat, that's why I'm stomping. I don't mean to pass out orders all the time, yet my counselors taught me to be in a hurry and never give up changing channels. So I developed a zealous stroke I'd hoped to cure by voyaging. Fancy that! I'd even try the meat loaf, though it's hard to improve on aversion, despite my desire to meet the native dweller's acquaintance head-on and factual. Under brows I mean.

Cla: Vacation nights are large and fragile like pan-fed eggs under fertile glass.

Tm: We're still trying to kill the doctor, right?

(*Exeunt En Masse.*)

Scene IV

(*Office of the doctor, Director of the Archaeological Museum.*)

Doctor: Cockleshells in half a basket. Native money's inadequate. (*Squinting out the window.*) Space is quite the beautiful letter. Oh God, I'm confusing myself again.

Aut. 1: Calm yourself down boss. I'm sure your ruse is working as we speak. Plaitwork is a very current disguise for what I think is under my worktable.

Aut. 2: I had a lovely lunch of portfish upon a sandy wine. And guess what boss? I saw your protagonists, and they were reading a letter thrown in their path by Basket. I recognized the stationery squirming against the light-struck Mediterranean tablecloth, not to go on but ELOQUENCE IS CATCHING!

(Automatons move briskly next to potted palm in the center of the office where they go through a series of muscle-man poses while reciting.)

Aut. 1: Dearest Eugene:

Aut. 2: I would love to abduct . . .

Aut. 1: But oh no, not me! I cannot say . . .

Aut. 2: Hands as big as the sky.

Aut. 1: But smaller than my use for sky.

Aut. 2: Dear Eugene,

Aut. 1: Is that your real name?

Aut. 2: And why should it matter to me if it isn't? I keep forgetting to mention your . . .

Aut. 1: . . . friend. Is she a good friend or a bad one? Are you good or bad?

Aut. 2: And what am I?

Aut. 1&2: Mostly truly yours.

Doctor: (Still squinting.) The job in the open window. I don't want to express myself in the matter because of redundant confusion . . . FALL TO!

(Automatons move smartly to attention as if caught in previous exaggerations.)

Aut. 2: Your palette is our pantheon; surely we see tattoos in your merest birthmarks and your forehead scorches a grenade of intentions. A tube of smoke coils from under your arm to outline your path and obscure what's left of your figure. I speak illustratively and explosively of every meaning you make. We were young and great stores were built up to meet the contentions of those famous times. I had a

personal handle and it was no damn cane knob, but then you know how a family comes along that's yours to feed. Friendly rulers, hah! They bit the hand you lent them. All their talk of a new wing was just more and more salt on our tails. . .

(Protagonists burst through the door.)

Tm: Knock. (Catching sight of Automatons.) How can one person be as cute as all these natives!

Doctor: Now, wait just a minute.

Cla: You're surprised?

Tm: Still, cuteness isn't everything. Myself, I'm exhausted from fifteen years of being a visitor!

Doctor: Wait a minute, please. I'm clinging to my idea . . . of myself when I used to think about something else. Anything else. Relics. How to do surgery on relics . . . ? The baby finger follows the paternalistic hand. Until you find yourself at the foot of the relic-maker who says he's making soap containers for the public baths.

Tm: Rapprochement indeed! (Stomping foot in a mild state of self-absorption.)

Cla: There you go again, acting like you just crossed the Bosphorus in a hospital bed. My shoulders feel bare. I seem to persist in a languor of free will. Somehow I'm always off by one in my implement count . . .

Aut. 2: My belly's a crisper, and my head's a freezer. May I be of service?

Tm: Well, first I landed here on a whim then after several days of lonely site seeing we met in the rain on the day they pulled the fist out of the water. There was a sense of events being momentous, of people's daily routines being disrupted, but though the routines were disrupted and there were unusual fires there was little more that actually

was momentous. It was almost like being inside an advertisement for a vacation, with everything lovely. You can't see where you are because there are only two dimensions. Outside, a viewer looks on. To know where you are, you have to read the viewer's desire. There may be a feeling of danger, in fact there was such a feeling, all the light having seeped out of the sky and even the orange flames licking uncertainly as if a sudden coup might put them out. But where was the danger, really? It was only a sensation. Still, we'd just met; we followed the sensation and gave each other to it. In this way, we achieved the state you may recall of being tied to each other for several years — back to back! That made the sensation seem real enough. Conversation died out. Then it rekindled, and we thought we might help our careers by acquiring a more scientific knowledge of the value of danger in this community. We could get this knowledge and take it some place else. It would gain luster on a mainland. We got up the questions for our interview on the premise that our subjects would be natives. However, nobody we've interviewed on these subjects seems to live here. We have learned that this is the office of a well-known anthropologist. In our discouragement we hopefully and humbly seek the advice of a professional.

Doctor: Yes?

Cla: And we're mis-anthropologists! (*Swings the rope around the doctor, pulls him to and cinches him.*) Now we'll see the gist of this expert's opinion captive to our audience. Out of our way, don't move. By all means, immobile creatures! Let us pass.

Doctor: I suppose this means I'll be missing my appointment with the plasterer?

Tm: Maybe you shouldn't have mentioned about having that boat, huh?

(*The characters are tipped into the eye of a telescope. In a rapidly shifting cinema of details they pour toward the island's port.*)

Cla: You know, when I talk about danger, I'm not talking about someone else's but my own. Oh dear, here we are at Point Colossus and swarming masses of Hindu European Greek midship people and their families are racing around doing chores while I'm just being hard to pin down. I don't like boats. I don't want to go on one. It's more of a challenge to me to learn to clown around.

(*She disappears into the crowd leaving Tm with their captive. She has entered an alley and bends over to pet a stray cat. In the meantime, Tm, who does seem to be a real boat-owner, leads the doctor on board, pours him a drink and sets sail for America.*)

Tm: (*At sea.*) Heavens, man. Take a seat. Scotch? Let's say, dare I say, I've been tied to someone for fifteen years and now it's time to get rich? Shall I write your speeches, or will you write mine?

(*Meanwhile, back in Port Colossus . . .*)

Cla: I'm already beginning to remember everything differently. Once upon a time I was swept away by desire for experience, experience without justice. What can anybody see in any man? A generous opening on a conversational line is but a toy. Oh, I have had motives and intentions for every disguise. Behind every attitude I strike lies an undissolved thought. He's out there now with his cargo, negotiating fees.

Aut. 2: Would you like to join us in a game of hodge podge?

Cla: Why not? It's starting to get cold. What are the rules?

Aut. 1: Rule 1 — Eat dust before entering game and don't fall down during.

Rule 2 — Train late but not too late.

Rule 3 — Rub it out but not without disclosing its meaning first.

Rule 4 — Rub it out but not without disclosing its value first.

Rule 5 — Do not replace with Eucalyptus.

Rule 6 — Manage without disclosing what you control.
Rule 7 — Change your mind before you win so as not to lose.

(While at that very moment at sea . . .)

Doctor: The water's rising around your little backgammon board is it not?

Tm: *(Speaking out to sea.)* On my left I see Thrace. My right hand waves as Tunis passes. My forehead marks out Malta or Gibraltar. The further I look the further South I drift until even the letter *I* points South. I think there are no people left in this world at all. Yet one sailor, that one, is large and seems expressive. Talk to your captain, sailor. Where are you from?

LgSailor: From behind the door.

Tm: Work the oar then, if you're as big as its handle.

Doctor: I have a lot to say too. You, for example, give the impression that you've been captured by your captive. And what have I done to you to cause such a response? Don't worry, wherever it is you're taking me I'm sure I'll prosper. I'll be a great immigrant, armed with my medical decrees and my hairy masculinity. By the way, I noticed how uncomfortable you were in my country. Do you feel more at home out here?

Tm: Not here and not like this. I can't think upon such a balance.

LgSailor: Port ahead. Point Colossus.

Doctor: But we just left Point Colossus!

LgSailor: Been years that I wasn't there. Each his own thought.

Tm: I see Cla, thank heavens.

(Boat docks at Point Colossus, and Doctor slinks away.)

Tm: Where did you find that cat? She's sticking to you like a dart to a barstool.

Cla: Where's your pal?

Tm: Disappeared the moment I caught sight of you. He's really . . .

Cla: Interesting? Smooth? Fun? Cranky? Ingenuous? Useful? Talented? Stingy? Forgiving?

Tm: Pick one, and I'll elaborate.

Cla: You know, I really think I'd rather go get a job. I want to be . . . not just myself anymore. And . . .

Tm: Please! Here we are reunited, and change is your only theme. I had quite a chance to think too, stuck out there with my own vengeful purpose and its object . . . My this has been a long and tiring day. I think I'd like a nap before dinner.

Cla: They say tonight's a big feast of candles in a square. Want to go with me and my cat?

Tm: That's the spirit. But first a little nap. Aren't you tired?

(Lies down. Light fades from heavens.)

Scene V

(Later that evening. The party's over. The Automaton is seated crescent-wise around their fire. The restrained animation of the flames.)

Aut. 1: I don't think the boss enjoyed his meat loaf tonight.

Aut. 2: Yah. I've been thinking about buying a couple of chairs. Where would you go? It's not like I need to rest, but somebody might.

Aut. 1: Oh, no, I'm ready for more action. Maybe in a while we can get generic, what do you think?

Aut. 2: You mean with the boys or with the girls?

(Enter Doctor.)

Doctor: I find in myself several personality types. This is not scientific, so I only think these things in private. But since this is an occasion on which I must speak, I must say what's on my mind or experience a resounding silence and humiliate myself. If the yachtsman in me were to experience the kind of humiliation I am considering, he would introduce you to his boat.

(Turning toward the Automations.)

Their fire flickers. A tottering flame looks over its shoulder at the storefronts. There is a fire story the flames like to tell, and they rally their strength to tell it: it is about hospitals and hotels and glass and bags of rice and microphones. A story of objects, encasements of power. Once upon a time, hospitals would glide on the heels of useless possessions and encompass them and mean to consume their glamour.

(The Flames now speak.)

Flames: He grabs a cup of coffee deducing that he grasps the pattern on the cup. I hear something pouring over every edge, but maybe that's just his seasonal fog contending with my guise. Yet, when I concentrate I get the sense of ocean through a tunnel. Somewhere. Let me put this question to you, O fallow citizen: if a tent falls on seventy worthless and reckless fellows, don't go in the damned tent! A friend of the daughter of mortal man without hills to creep into, my manner's to be overwhelmed in a crowd of waiting frictions. Last night a branch cracked its elbow across my window. Cogent and scorned, fading before your eyes like parade's end, I saw the protagonist dream such words: "She never says a word or repeats another's, as though it is no concern of hers who sees these symptoms. Instead,

from each room the view pours atmosphere upon her expectations; she is my conviction; through the touchstone of her acting she controls my veneration; she beholds the population of our city and the stipulations of our tune; she rolls the dice in a generation of dice."

A whiff of chemistry's perfume came up. Misgiving held her back. The glowering of her flawless glow set up a courteous emblem that betokened touch. I detected an aggregate night holding a white place. The fact of creation is the final fact. He has, in fact, a fine boat he bought cheap from an Indo-European fire fighter in Khartoum.

(Flames die out.)

Doctor:

Being funneled toward soothing music drove me mad. I have a fine boat that I bought cheap from an Indo-European fire fighter in Khartoum. I handed him a napkin full of stones, which he took the liberty to toss at the boat to prove its soundness. You see the SUE painted on her? Well, that's short for my secret name for her — Sueless Dentata. You know how when you want to disguise a meaning you take its depth away? But, not content to withstand the exposure of wind and seaklike heroes, I promise my adventurous spirit a professional license and spend most of my time on land between San Francisco and Rhodes, practicing medicine on tourists. Sometimes I sail from place to place, but you will never catch me at it. It's private like I was saying before. So you see, even though I tell you all my least public thoughts, I go about by and large unobserved and safe from the kind of scrutiny elephants in zoos enjoy. Indeed, the third kind of person I tend to find within myself is more closely related to the animal kingdom than one might expect of an international humanitarian yachtsman.

Flames:

(Flaring up a final time.) During the days before his breakdown he was in control of many people whose bidding he was doing at a breakneck pace. It has something to do with one of those folksy "as strong as an ox" atavistic sayings.

Doctor: (*Stamping out the flames.*) That's what I see in myself after being deficient in cures. Now, through this deep identification, I have determined that there is a general applicability, so that people, when ill, should be taught to think of themselves as strong and obedient bovine animals. First, they should think of their strength and experience it unrestrainedly through practice and mental discipline, then they should harness this strength in the yoke of daily containment and thrust themselves wholeheartedly into the work of civilizations. I always do this myself and need little from life as a consequence. My needs are simple: the possibility of adventure, an object with object status, and a profession. Have you ever taken a test that asks you . . .

Tm: Here we are again, faced with another important decision.

Doctor: what's the most important thing . . .

Cla: Let's get out of here, okay?

Doctor: . . . food, sleep, love, sex, mental health, etc.?

Tm: Wait.

Cla: What for?

Doctor: For staying alive, of course.

Cla: I wasn't talking to you.

Doctor: That's the problem with people, they only talk to each other. They get weaker and weaker. Think of yourself as being strong as an ox.

Tm: We don't like advice.

Doctor: Well, then join me on my yacht for a little adventure.

Cla: We don't seek adventure.

Doctor: When you grab a cup of coffee imagine that you're grasping the pattern on the cup. Of course not!

Tm: Why kill him off? For he is not alive. (*Looking in basket, he finds a note. Slowly, seemingly without comprehension, he reads the note then looks up at the audience.*) "An I of failing masks."

Cla: You mean like first impression best impression? Or first impressions last?

(*Lights lower. The End.*)

R a y D i P a l m a

What's rank upon
the light and simpler
yet everything
sublime comes upon
the ill-conceived
the knife-marked
bluffing the welt

The positive shadow
a landmark
The derrick in the garden
holds up the rainbow
another shadow
on the pot of gold

A word cut
clean through
to the language

Dark on
real emphasis
is not then
real time
but accent
by accident
Punkt

The commonplace caught
up in somehow is antic

Incomprehensibles
Automatique

For greeting

The common place then
is foreground

The antic holds the sky
some clouds a few trees
the sun or moon and where
you put your foot some rubble

Quite common

This posture
behind origin

Teal
when we walk under it

or find it in the eye

teal

on the officer's back

the designer's cut
brings up the turf
and gun metal

glint
that turns the eye
along the barrel
up numb teal the thumbprint
printer's whorl
or dead limb

Kentucky grass
across the storm high
aim shoving the clouds

into gloom's tune
Gauloises and serge heft
of the strega's gown
icetooth holding
a Gitanes

Gold does
and doesn't

a fly
on the gold

still
does

a bar
stamped

'Pelikan'

does
too

bravo
the budget

bravo
the warm

budge

Made in yellow ink
not gold
G*A*U*D*E*A*M*U*S
the marginal note
that does not gloss
but hardens the distinction
Edition not Add
Nota Bene, signor
non compos mentis
the demand
gone by rote
too late to reach
by the same route

This cut stone ever
a new object
always what is found there
not the smashed fore corner
of a book a subsidy of questions
instead the hard
case of light the wall
or its progress///the hieratic
put there
dropped into time
script bold after flame
not the ash of paper
and paper's time

THREE POEMS

David Sternbach

("in the case of girls")

in the
case of loss
of force
or habit

determination
under
a bed of
hair

so much
movement

this
utopian
sleeplessness

toss about
a wall
of silence

one under
each leg

staredown
becomes
a planned
community

a fear
of futures

bedful

a slow
runner

dark waves
over
an open
floor

Advice

1

a dotted line
of vision
represented here

for Nancy and Sluggo
an ink knothole

I'd be quick
to look on and on
even past
the point of seeing

and draw the gaze
on practices

printed once
and then erased

2

pills equals
jobs and drinks
equals jobs
and families
in the manufacture

places overflow
for naming

science fiction clinics
introduce secure degradation

vulnerable windows

launch aprons

and iron curtains

bring the wars
home as economy

bring especially
home economy

3

already
softened streets
give a little
in an in-
duced sleep wave

men sweat again
over labor of restraint

the red hand
or the white hand
or the black and blue
affection

continuity comes
apart in twos
unable to
set loose
the binding agent

4

a boy's noose
stuffed with pillows
allows a narrow escape

or the artful
bedclothes story

a cotton-ticking body
left behind

they'll never
find my body

which I keep
wrapped in
paper and impulses

those being
opposites and
attractive

keep those
home fires
out of control

I learn to count off
backwards
from a flashpoint
to a social
definition

warming hands
to repeated tellings

a fleshprint
pressed into service

daily cartoon pain
is made of locally
radiating lines

I find my favorite
and walk away
unaroused

Why Do Words Fall in Love

all that work
becomes a legend
arms around
the pulp world
inky with previous episodes

conversation pages
forget all futures
let us live together

and talk you
into a state

or institute

an account
of us folded over

let to set scenes
and believe them

I say "I say"

loving
lip service
manufactured

to impress
first then
release

open your
mouth
to site

come to
expect
the baseless

turning
on your
side
the away
side

no landed
entry

cited from
a working
culture

a cut
of billowed
sheets

crack in
trans-
mission

a mimic
of
flatness

MODEL FOR MATTER

Deanna Ferguson

And leaves as if the backhoe deserves it
Several winds face a way turns
learned is more than again remember
lay down two wide

Time more than before then after
It is time now, it's time again
three eleven eleventh street eleven
slighted distance across
from the tracks

Near some lagoon a measure
Few paraded backward lines
pour side a town

quilted page covers what
copper pipes elbow whites
plastic sheet as if language
were unions outside of
language

Miserrors, upright, rot
I want to know paper pends

Cab truck blue protects health of the nation
whence collect behavior
pens malfunction
tighten method

Complicit, gear shift, quick, out
Else adjusted light

words house sleep eat activities

Waiting of settlement
of familiar skid

Unusual times slippage names

gesture force mood

until three days over bloat
relieve heavy seine

Repose or clothes hanging on hangers
Time note repetition pass as habits

slaps

Thickens of idea into another
tickle the underdog

slur flesh discussed

Discover reflex assemblage

Gear a new ritual

Remove input shaft until bearings move

inside stealing home a must

Out with an idea

Adjusting height, line lengthen

leg stretch quick before

take someone for example

Went up to the big street
to witness litter

a find just when unnecessary
opens

Frightening diminish

seemingly with the worst intentions
sentence lapse incase

Laughed alone

Park and what pulls up

licence I done you

late in the night

Traverse region in a big ten

Welcome to a new colony

no protest

yet dreamt

A clenching hand on two throats

Little single red

Split up equally

I am asking

more for cleave

Nothing is different

No insult, attention

Attention is one hard line

And for the duration

POEM

Julia Steele

stirring stick truant

a hatchet

restless as she goes

captive smock

torpor

belated

hellgate

cotton furnished bosom

2

unbound summer

scatter

porridge

to sustain

breakfast sowing surprise

compressed heat unopened drawer

scourge

neatly please to the point

a winter dress

elsewhere

unbraiding

through heaviness and fatigue

guilt

now lucky having lost

strangely disordered and mismatched

a pencil of black

fledging volume

cotton cap

eclipse

a cordial smile

Charles Bernstein

This essay is based on a talk presented as the "Summary Address" to the "Radical Poetics / Critical Address" conference at the State University of New York at Buffalo, on Tax Day — April 15, 1988. In its present form, it was first presented at the Kootenay School of Writing in Vancouver on "American" Flag Day — June 14, 1989.

This is not a transcription. More like a reenactment of the possibilities of performative poetics as improvisatory, open-ended.

As a way to engage the relation of poetics to poetry and by implication differentiate poetics from literary theory and philosophy, although not necessarily from poetry.

As a way to extend ideas about closure — the rejection of closure — into the discussion of essays and critical writing.

To eject, that is, the idea that there is something containable to say: completed saying.

So that poetics becomes an activity that is ongoing, that moves in different directions at the same time, and that tries to disrupt or problematize any formulation that seems too final or preemptively restrictive.

Speaking at the Buffalo conference, Linda Reinfield pointed to the wedding that was being enacted (which is really always being enacted) between critical theory and poetry as a kind of subtext of that gathering. Hearing Rosmarie Waldrop read, in that context, from *Reproduction of Profiles* suggested something very much along these lines: Waldrop has created a literal wedding, in the sense of wedding together, or fusing, of philosophy and poetry. In this work, she has taken phrases from Elizabeth Anscombe's translation of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and added — weaved in — phrases of her own making. The structure of *Reproduction of Profiles* provokes a number of questions, including the status of Wittgenstein's original text, which may itself be taken as a poetic work, and also the status of the *Reproduction of Profiles* — what kind of a work is that?

My idea of a wedding may seem one-sided: I see it from the point-of-view of poetry, if I make that distinction at all. From this bias, poetry is the trump; that is to say, in my philosophy, poetry has the power to absorb these other forms of writing, while, in contrast, these other forms do not have that power over poetry. This is because I imagine poetry, impossibly — I know others won't share this view — as that which can't be contained by any set of formal qualities, while, by way of contrast, one might be able to read novels or letters or scientific treatises in terms of their poetic qualities, as sort of formally fixed genres of poetry. So when I think of the relation of poetry to philosophy, I'm always thinking of the poeticizing of philosophy, or making the poetic thinking that is involved in philosophy more explicit.

Or else I imagine poetics as an invasion of the poetic into other realms: overflowing the bounds of genres, spilling into talk, essays, politics, philosophy. . . . That is, poetics as a sort of *applied poetic*, in the sense that engineering is a form of applied mathematics.

One of the discarded titles for the Buffalo conference was "Approaching Radical Poetics." I was thinking of the idea of approaching radical poetics much in the way that various space exhibitions allow you to imagine approaching, say, Saturn from a spaceship.

After several weeks at light-speed, we sight our destination. A small expeditionary force is sent down in the module to explore the impossible, cratered surface. After several days of experiments and sampling, the crew returns to the mother ship, leaving a small force to colonize the new terrain.

— You're approaching radical poetics, and then you're arriving at them, and then you're departing . . . Approaching suggesting movement. And maybe you make a rapprochement with them, or not.

It's the kinetics of criticism I want to address. While the spatial and temporal dynamics of poetics are not new topics, they are, nonetheless, all too rarely accessed (activated), at least when we enter the realm of academic criticism (what Alvin Gouldner calls the "culture of critical discourse") or, more generally, "public" discourse or "nonfiction."

Let me hasten to note that I think of public discourse as a form of fiction. I always appreciated the fact that the Dewey decimal system classifies poetry as nonfiction. Still, when *Content's Dream* was published I wanted that to be classified as "essays/fiction." People sometimes ask me if I'm interested in writing a novel. I say, well, I did, that's it.

Maybe this begins, in talking about the poetics of criticism, to suggest

what I mean by excess, enthusiasm, or, as Marjorie Perloff has it in a review of Steve McCaffery's essays, passion. These terms are absolutely crucial for understanding not only the motivation but also the quality of the writing in the poetics that I'm talking about. It is also an important consideration in evaluating these works' status, if any, as theory.

I planned to expand on this last point later on, but let me switch to that, if only to emphasize the combinatorial nature of the composition I'm developing. Anything can be moved. Rearrangement is not only possible but desirable.

By combinatorial, I'm referring to Waldrop's discussion of the modular style of Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* and other works, where various units — sentences, phrases, words — are permuted or, more importantly, permutable; the sort of disjunctive collage or serial ordering that characterizes much recent poetry.

Essays can also be combinatorial, marking a sharp break from essays that are developmentally narrative. We are trained by expository writing models not to think of essays as combinatorial; that is, that you could, and might well, reorder all the sentences. You have an outline and there's supposed to be some sort of quasilogical development.

This is specifically not what I am interested in doing.

Except that I do wish to employ such rhetorical modes insofar as they appear to be invested with greater social power — not only to expose or explode the relation between style and status but also to access the power in these high-status forms. Certain writing styles have more status than others — a status that shifts with time and place and audience. Status applying not only to intrageneric styles but also to genres themselves — the status of theory versus the status of poetics, the status of criticism versus the status of poetry. This social dynamic is something that I consider when determining what writing style to deploy in a given circumstance.

To put the worst possible light on this, I'm interested not in what theory can do in an abstract way, but in what theory can do in a political way, in a pragmatic way. Some people will listen just to poetry and poetics, anything else they think of as highly problematic; for them poetry's got the real, if necessarily marginalized, status.

But for a whole realm of other people, maybe some of you here have met them — *maybe you, sir, in the second row* — authoritative theoretical discourse has much more impact and much more social status.

(Theory without authoritative status — which is not the same as theory without authority — begins to resemble what I've been calling poetics.)

I don't mean to exclude myself. The less I know about something

the more susceptible I am to "authoritative" discourse about it — authoritative discourses that are continually being disseminated by both the mass communications systems and by the specialized knowledge producers of the social and natural and human sciences: that is to say, by the dominant players in setting the rules for official public discourse — what I call *acceptable communication behavior*. And what are these rules? Alvin Gouldner defines two of them: using terms that are relatively independent of context and making intellectual claims whose validity is justified without reference to the author(ity)'s (speaker's) social role (and, I would add, choice of discursive and aesthetic presentational style).

Coming out of the political culture of the late 1960s, I sometimes imagined that one should seize these means of power rather than simply refuse them or try to operate without them. But this is a very questionable tactic, I hesitate to call it a strategy, because insofar as you seize these authoritative modes, you become them. There's no way to use them without reproducing them. So it's always an ambivalent thing, and I don't think it's possible not to err when you do this. You err on the side of power.

Yet this approach enabled me, empowered me I think is the term often used now . . . I mean what would it be like to empower white, male heterosexuals? It's a curiously warped notion . . . This empowered me to resume the activity that was happily bracketed off. But resume it in a different way, from a different direction.

Not that any one naturally produces these various authoritative styles; it's always an effort of self-fashioning, of forging, whether more or less consciously. I think of Edmond Jabès's comment that a Jew, in his remarkable sense that Jewishness is the condition of writing, is always in exile, even in her own words.

I want to raise the implicit error in these lines of reasoning because one of the main things I want to suggest is that poetics must necessarily involve error.

Error in the sense of wandering, errantry, but also error in the sense of mistake, misperception, incorrectness, contradiction. Error as projection (expression of desire unmediated by rationalized explanation): as slips, slides . . .

Then again, the issue of error is transformed for me into a question of humor.

I am interested, insofar as possible, to try to put into talks like this, essays, certain kinds of pratfalls, the equivalent of slipping on a banana, or throwing a pie in my own face. So that that error is made explicit as part of the process.

And then the humor itself begins to make dialectical or trilectical or quadrilectical some of the power dynamics I am talking about. It can be like juggling four or five or six different things.

But alas I can only juggle one thing at a time, so as I am juggling all these different things hopefully three or four of them will fall to the ground.

Hopefully some of them will be rotten tomatoes.

And you'll say what happened to that one.

And you'll begin to get it.

Here's the thing.

I want to suggest that there is a mismatch between poetics and poems. The poetics of a poet will often seem at odds with the poems; there's an incommensurability between the two.

This mismatch strikes people in different ways. For example they may say, "Your poetry doesn't seem to conform to your theory." For me this is as if to say, "That poem you read last night doesn't seem like the same kind of poem you read just now." But it's not as likely that someone will think that one poem is an attempt to explain, or mirror, another poem. One doesn't have the sense, at least not as strongly, that different poems by the same writer will match.

Poetics needn't be understood as explanations of some prior body of work. Even theoretical pronouncements, or manifestoes, that say "Poetry should be . . ." or "Poetry could do . . ." or "My poetry stands for . . ." For rhetorical reasons, these *mys* or *wes* seem to suggest that you are talking about yourself or your own work. But it ain't necessarily so. For example, I'm very apt, if someone asks me for an explanation of one of my poems, to give a wrong explanation. I'm not interested in giving accurate explanations. I'm very often interested in giving misleading explanations because I want to use the occasion to say what I want to say *at that time*. Not to explain what it was I meant some other time. I'm not a scholar of my work trying to give a legitimating account or justification. I think to mislead is one of the great pleasures of being a poet and a poet who writes essays.

I know many poets aspire to be leading poets. I've already achieved my aim of being a misleading poet.

Not that I would ever mislead you.

Bruce Comens makes a useful distinction, in his Buffalo talk on Zukofsky, between "a" and "the," or, even more radically, "an" and "the": a discourse, a theory, or an discourse, an theory, versus *the*.

I would also emphasize the *a* rather than the *the*, although I would

always want to use the *the* in situations where I needed to convince somebody of something.

See, if you say "a" people say "eh!"; if you say "the" they say "THE!" So you sometimes have to use "the."

I have a lot of background in doing that.

The distinction between "a" and "the" is *the* distinction I want to make here about critical theory.

Charles Altieri, writing recently on the politics of contemporary poetry, seems appalled by the claims made by, and in behalf of, various formally innovative poetics of the present moment. The claims, he says, get in the way of the poetry's capacity to explore individual "imaginative investments"; to make bald, even "grandiose," political claims for what appear to be a poem's formal qualities is a disservice to what poetry can actually do [p. 307].

Altieri specifically contrasts specious "political claims" with "elaborations of the specific writerly intensities and reflexive qualities that can *justify* some of the difficulties in the poetry" [p. 301, emphasis added]. Thus criticism has its proper role not in promulgating unfounded claims, confabulating difficulties, and proceeding to incite poetical riotousness, but in explaining (away?) difficulties, adjudicating tones, and deflating the rhetoric of poetics, if any is found.

Yet claims for poetry, even of the most theoretical or untenable or theatrical kinds, have the same status as any other type of poetic utterance. Claims have a *kind of* beauty, and certainly *kind in* tropicity, whether they are modest or exaggerated or overly enthusiastic or erroneous. I hear claims as engaging, moving sometimes, disturbing. To separate claims from poetry, even claims made "outside" the poem, and say "well that to me seems peripheral" is foreign to my conception of poetry, though certainly not foreign to other conceptions of poetry about which Altieri has written persuasively.

Making claims is an aspect of a poet's work that has vast potential — staking out ground to inhabit — especially insofar as these claims preempt or *needlessly* complicate subsequent, ostensibly more accurate, critical approaches. (They often have the opposite effect.) This means speaking for yourself in different tongues, even if other people might speak for you more accurately: for it is just this accuracy that you might wish to contest.

That is to say, you might wish to make claims for your work and the work that you support that are inaccurate and that need to be put out in order to misrepresent that work properly.

Now is that remark ironic or is it humorous or is it comic?

What I'm emphasizing is a provisional quality of the enterprise of poetics.

In other words, I think that activities such as this one have to be understood as situational. For one thing, you're responding to factors that exist historically, at the most concrete level. The poetic positions taken have to be understood within the context of other poetic positions that are articulated by other poets, or nonpoets, at the moment, but also in the past. It's not just a question of differentiating your position. You have to take account of the claims of your poetic predecessors which were made partly in response to situations no longer immediately apparent. These are less claims about poetry in the abstract or their own work as such than attempts to redress or respond to other contemporaneous and historical claims. Nonetheless, insofar as their claims have become generalized or decontextualized — *romanticized* — then these claims may also require *redress*, in order to tip the balance the other way. The positions you may be disputing may have arisen because it was, at one time, necessary to emphasize a term or process or mode to combat a prevalent, but poetically disenfranchising, view. Poetics is all about changing the current poetic course. Putting on a dress, not strapping yourself into a uniform.

It's almost like sailing . . . I've never been on a sailing boat . . . but I like metaphors where I know nothing about . . . where somehow you're tackling one way, you're moving back and forth, based on which way the wind is blowing.

If spirit is taken to mean religiosity, then one might well emphasize materiality. But if materiality withers as an active poetic term then it may require critique as, say, overly desiccated or deanimated. Strictly speaking, it's absurd to be for or against subjectivity; yet the subject may be an area of poetic contest that forces philosophically odd, but poetically comprehensible, polarizations. Key categories like these, or ones such as form, process, tradition, communication, subject matter, abstraction, representation, concreteness, expression, emotion, intellectuality, plainness, voice, meaning, clarity, difficulty, content, history, elegance, beauty, craft, simplicity, complexity, prosody, theme, sincerity, objectification, style, imagination, language, and realism have no unitary or definitive sense within poetics; they are, like the personal pronouns, *shifters*, dependent for their meaning on the particular context in which they are used.

Equally at play in the context of poetics is the political and social situation, including the social configuration of poetry in terms of distribution, publishing, capitalization, jobs, awards, reviews. I am motivated to speak as persuasively or eloquently as I can for any

number of poets and poetic perspectives left out of that loop. In contrast, there are various prominent poets and poetic commonplaces that I sometimes have negative things to say about which I might wish to support, or call attention to, if they were unknown. Resisting the institutionalization of interpretation is a motivation for both poetics and poetry.

Maybe this is why the sort of official nonpartisanship of the post-*Self-Portrait* John Ashbery is — not “the great disaster” — but a great disappointment for our letters (to appropriate Williams's comment on Eliot). — Yes I know, some poets may recoil from playing Quixote or weave the windmills into their poems and leave the charging to Sanchos of more desperate circumstance. Ashbery, of any period, could never be disappointment for “our” poetry, quite the opposite; the very sweep of his poetic achievement may accelerate his recoil from the burden of poetics.

These are factors that should not be overlooked — it's what I mean by “optimism” — what motivates me to write about various individuals or make certain poetic claims. I'm motivated to write about someone or something partly because I have something to advocate that is not otherwise advocated, not just because I have some abstract idea to express. For one thing, an abstract idea could be expressed in terms of different subject matter or references. It's a social optimism expressed by worldly partiality rather than intellectual disinterestedness. These references are not there to invoke closure, though they may seem so in retrospect, but rather to open up ground, to contribute toward the works' continuing: a sort of critical plowing and fertilizing in the meadows of my enthusiasms.

I'm advocating a poetics that is not adjudicating, not authoritative for all other poetry, not legislating rules for composition. But rather a poetics that is both tropical and socially invested: in short, poetic rather than normative. A view which is related to those critical theorists who in the past few years have insisted that all criticism, like all historiography or anthropology, indeed all nonfiction genres, are tropical because of the inevitable literary biases of all modes of writing. This means that positivist, “value free” claims made for any mode of writing are more a matter of social positioning for authority than unequivocal knowledgeability. Although that is not to deny the passionate belief that prompts such blindness to epistemic underdeterminacy, nor that there is real social value, in particular circumstances, of unchastened belief — what has been called, after all, the operating principle of normal science.

Given the status accorded to scientific reasoning, it is imperative to

heaven claims of technological disinterestedness with a recognition of the heightened social power enabled by such claims to authority. The use of such authoritativeness can be justified, in the sense that using violence can be justified in certain situations such as self-defence; but it's a precarious road. And authoritative language, while hardly equitable with physical violence, is, nonetheless, a form of manipulation and coercion.

Still, at times, it may be necessary to resort to authoritative discourse.

For instance, if you're being billed improperly and are trying to get your account adjusted.

Surely it's apparent that operating within a paradigm is technologically very productive, even, at times, poetically productive. Yet we may want to set aside some domain in the arts and sciences for radical questioning of assumptions: not to insist that this must be the preoccupation of all cultural or scientific work but that it should be the preoccupation of *some*. At present, I would argue that poetry has assumed this role, not exclusively, but with a great deal of resourcefulness at its disposal. Kind of the unappointed philosophy (epistemology without portfolio) of, if not the age, at least sectors of it.

In *The Future of Intellectuals*, Alvin Gouldner argues that "the culture of careful and critical discourse (CCD)" is the social glue of a New Class of intellectuals and technical intelligentsia that is becoming dominant worldwide. CCD is a grammar of discourse shared by a "speech community" and centered on modes of *justification* based on "explicit and articulate rules, rather than diffuse precedents or tacit features of the speech context." CCD "values expressly legislated meanings and devalues . . . context-limited meanings. Its ideal is: 'one word, one meaning,' for everyone and forever. . . . [CCD] requires that the validity of claims must be justified without reference to the speaker's *societal position or authority*." This delegitimation of "context sensitivity" and "context-variability" is part of CCD's own privileged claim to "theoreticity" as a universal and incontestable standard of *all* serious speech. From now on, persons and their social positions must not be visible in their speech. Speech becomes impersonal. Speakers hide behind their speech. Speech seems to be disembodied, de-contextualized, and self-grounded." Thus CCD is a descendant of both Romanicism (in its revolt against imposed rules and traditions) and Positivism (in its adoption of mathematical models of reasoning) [pp. 27-29, 34].

The most important point of Gouldner's discussion of the culture of critical discourse is that it is politically motivated. "The New Class

is elitist and self-seeking and uses [CCD] to advance its own interests and power, and to control its own work situation" [p. 7]. The culture of critical discourse is a tool in its users' historically successful contests for power, control, and dominance.

Poetics don't explain; they redress and address.

Poetics are not supplemental but rather complementary (in the sense of giving compliments and in the sense of being additional, spilling over).

They are not directed to the unspecified world at large but rather intervene in specific contexts and are addressed to specific audiences or communities of readers.

Poetics is the continuation of poetry by other means. Just as poetry is the continuation of politics by other means.

Some tactics of poetics include hyperbole (though personally I would never exaggerate), understatement, metonymy, evasion, paranoia, aphorism, assonance, cacophony, caesura, rime, mosaic, blurring . . .

Poetics makes explicit what is otherwise unexplicit and, perhaps more importantly, makes unexplicit what is otherwise explicit.

Yet, without the expectation of correctness or the assurances of closure, what ground do we have for going on, for taking positions, for speaking with assurance or conviction? What recourse is there from the inhibition of only being able to speak when you are sure about the appropriateness and propriety of what you are going to say?

Optimism is my Emersonian answer, at least today, as my mood allows (or else, more blackly disposed, I fall silent): a willingness to try, to speak up for, to propose, to make claims; enthusiasm versus the cautiousness and passivity of never advancing what is not already known; judgment versus instrumental analysis; reason not ratio.

In "The American Scholar," Emerson talks about a boy standing before water not realizing that he can swim. It's an image I find very useful in responding to questions about how people can understand poetry that hasn't already been written, that they've not learned about previously. Moreover, how can it be written?

People often ask how it's possible to make distinctions among poems that depart from certain conventional restraints. What happens is that you become aware of all kinds of other conventions. But when you don't see that second part — the new conventions — you just can't get how distinctions are to be made, how you can judge what you like from what you don't. Such a reader is like the youth in Emerson's essay, who can't imagine that the water will buoy him up. But when you

jump in, of course, you discover that you can swim; if you don't sink in a panic of disbelief.

Trust your private thoughts, Emerson urges his young scholars, because they will speak the most publicly. Trust the associations that make sense to you, even if they appear out of tune or inarticulate or inconsistent: allow them to speak. "Self-reliance is the aversion of conformity."

(Why do I mention Emerson here? Is it purely a rhetorical gesture to try to pull someone with that kind of legitimating authority into an otherwise . . .)

One of the pleasures of poetics is to try on a paradigm — a series of related terms that characterize various poetic enterprises — and see where it leads you; not to lay down the line as *the* way to read poems, or even the poems considered, but a way . . . For there is great pleasure in compartmentalizing, in considering various works under a single stylistic sign, in generalizing about the common features in a varied assortment of work you like and don't like.

Yet, no matter how provisionally I cast my net, the work that results seems to develop an authority of its own that belies the investigatory premise. (Or so response to various of my essays has suggested.) Here's the dark side, the ghost that haunts my optimism and turns it into a pale rider on the plains of compromise and misgiving. What started as playful considerations of possibility becomes, after the fact, an edifice of molten lead; the nimble clay dries into a stone figure removed from the process that gave birth to it.

If poetry is beyond compare (desire for what is objectively perfect, in Zukofsky's terms; a form of truth-telling, in [Riding] Jackson's words) then any comparison, no matter how bracketed, risks being reductive or encapsulating or dismissive. For any mapping of poetic terrain is at the same time a mismatching, just as any positive statement (enthusiasm) can lead to a sclerotic authority that is based on the exclusionary force of the terms of engagement. This is because proposing any set of terms through which to read poems necessarily excludes other terms, other enthusiasms ("binding with briars / my joys and desires"). And no account of a poem can do justice to its many contradictory dimensions, even if the idea of contradiction is itself invoked. Criticism is necessarily insulting to the poetic work; it gives injury by its intrinsic belittling. (Laura [Riding] Jackson's relentless epistolary interventions being just the most extreme form of a commonly held view among poets.)

The idealization of the poetic as being without compare is worth

contesting. I want to taint poetry if only so that you can see it better — *taint* in the sense of *staining*, giving *tint*; poetry not as transcendent but as colored: *of* the world.

I think the answer is neither to try to make more correct maps nor to abandon cartography altogether.

In the end, you don't have to choose between enthusiasm (desire unbounded by argument) and systematization (reasoning by principles).

But that doesn't mean I don't have to.

Bruce Comens has pointed to Zukofsky's distinction between tactics and strategy. In the Zukofskian sense of the local and the particular, as opposed to the general and universal, I would also advocate a pragmatics of tactics. But this would be a strategy of tactics, a method of tactics. And therefore can be criticized as a self-cancelling strategy. Except if cancelling yourself is a value.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (*Arts de faire*), Michel de Certeau distinguishes between the strategy of power and the tactics of the dispossessed. Strategy represents a panoptic "triumph of place over time." One instance of the power of strategic knowledge is manifested by the historical ascent of rationality and the prerogatives of the culture of critical discourse documented by Gouddner.

[A] tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus [*un lieu propre*: a place of its own]. No delimitation of an exteriority . . . provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. . . . Thus it must play on the terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. It does not have the means to *keep to itself*, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection; it is a maneuver "within the enemy's field of vision" . . . and within enemy territory. It does not, therefore, have the options of planning general strategy and viewing the adversary as a whole within a . . . visible and objectifiable space. It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of "opportunities" and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids. What it wins it cannot keep [pp. 36–37].

De Certeau, citing Clausewitz's theory of war, calls tactics the art of the weak. Poetics, as tactics, is also the art of the weak, or rather poetics is "*minor*" *philosophy*, in Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's sense of "minor literature." The tactician, Clausewitz's weak strategist, uses

cunning, deception, and wit. Unable to operate from entrenched positions of power, she becomes a trickster or schtick artist who turns situations around by taking advantage of opportunities, using comedy to subvert occasions, employing the know-how and make-do of "cross-cuts, fragments, cracks, and lucky hits" [pp. 37-38].

Sophism, says de Certeau, is the dialectics of tactics. "As the author of a great 'strategic' system, Aristotle was already very interested in the procedures of this enemy, which perverted, as he saw it, the order of the truth [by] 'making the worse argument seem the better' [in the words of Corax]. [T]his formula . . . is the starting point for an intellectual creativity as persistent as it is subtle, tireless . . . scattered over the terrain of the dominant order and foreign to the rules laid down and imposed by a rationality founded on established rights and property" [p. 38].

But isn't this just another trick of the tactician — to feign dispossession in the face of a stagnant assurance of ground. For the strategist and his "strong" philosophy, deception is not a matter of tactics but a form of self-blindness: defending territory that belongs to no one, accumulating knowledge that would have value only in use. This is as if to say that syntax makes grammar, but grammar is only a reflection of a syntax that once was. The strategist-as-grammarian is the nomad, for he possesses his home in name only: his insistence on occupation and territorial defense precludes inhabitation. The syntactician makes her home where she finds herself, where she *attends* — and that is the only possession that's worth anything, a soil in which things can grow.

But here, as in some lunatic game of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether, everything's gone topsy-turvy. After all, it must be admitted in evidence that a theory of poetics — even a poetics of poetics — would no longer be poetics, would, that is, relinquish its tactical advantages as underdog and assume its proper place as strategy.

A strategy of tactics would be a way to hint at the totalizing counter-hegemonic project that Bruce Andrews has advanced. A way to think through, via parataxis, the relation among formal, anti-accommodationist, group-identified, cultural, regional, and gender-based poetic tactics so that they form a complementarity of critiques, projected onto an imaginary social whole in the manner of negative dialectics. That is, a social whole that can never be pictured since it is a "potentializing" formation, a "forming blank" in Arakawa and Madeline Gins's sense.

On a similar tack, I'm suggesting a syntax of motives (a sin tax on criticism) rather than a grammar of criticism, where grammar is the

normative term. The motive being to provoke response and evoke company. To acknowledge. To recognize. Though surely to recognize is also to misrecognize.

You see someone's face coming out of the fog and you are propelled to make out who it is — maybe they're looking for you — and you shout out some words of recognition.

Recognition and acknowledgment are much more important motivations for me than any sort of theoretical or explanatory paradigms.

Yet to provoke is wildly different than to evoke.

Provocation is very useful, though obviously overused in many situations . . . or used by the wrong people. — If only the people who are now provoking, by and large, would stop, and the ones who are being provoked would start, it wouldn't be so bad.

Belligerence in the pursuit of justice may not be a virtue. Yet even the articulation of a variant view in a nonprovocative way is seen, by many, as provocation. There may be no way not to be provocative when you are articulating positions that go against the grain. But you can also heighten the provocation. Sometimes you may wish to do just that for explicit reasons, while other times it's just a disagreeable "personal trip"; an echo of the worst traits of what you ostensibly oppose.

Belligerence produces belligerent responses. It's instructive to remember how radically Stein's poetics refused this particular vicious circle.

The defense of belligerent provocation is that you are not mediating, or smoothing over, what you say. At the same time, there are overwhelming problems with this form of communication behavior, especially as it seems to be stereotypically male behavior. The spectrum of response from evocation to provocation is perhaps not controllable but it can be monitored. Sometimes you may want an angry response, but continually provoking angry responses stops being useful. At least in the context of poetry: in other spheres, such as foreign policy or civil rights, the dynamics are different.

Reading Michael Davidson's study of the poetry communities comprising the San Francisco Renaissance has given me the chance to reconsider my assumptions about what seems to be a — to some degree continuing — valorization of confrontation and initiation as the surest signs of poetic authenticity. Davidson points to the use-value of behavior that might otherwise seem cliquish and intolerant; indeed, he contexualizes these troubling communication "behaviors" so that they are transformed into a significant collective practice of cultural oppo-

sition and poetic integrity, given a specific sociocultural environment in which such behavior sustained the ability to make independent critiques at the margins (sexually, geographically, stylistically) of U.S. culture. Davidson argues that the "bonding" that may seem exclusivist and narrow to outsiders was essential for the self-fashioning and survival of these poetry communities and their poetry.

"For [Jack] Spicer," Davidson writes, "it was essential to use [inter-group] conflicts to create a disturbance, however unpleasant, in order to challenge complacency and tolerance. Such disturbances were a way of verifying the loyalty of community members while, at the same time, excluding those who would enter from without. To some extent Spicer's sectarian and oppositional spirit can be found in all bohemian enclaves, based as they are on elaborate pecking orders and cult loyalties" [ch. 6, pp. 357-358].

Since Spicer and others intentionally violated the rules of "official communication behavior," to understand their poetics one has to reverse Gouldner's rules of critical discourse: it is necessary to acknowledge who is speaking and to recognize their terms as interested and context-dependent. Thus what appears to be dogmatic and hermetic by official standards must simultaneously be understood as an effective oppositional strategy that allows the needed social space for the poetry to be created. Yet a high price is paid for the blurring of the lines between aesthetic issues and personal/community power struggles. And the *legacy* of such power struggles as "poetic" behavior is no more fruitful than any of the other received ideas of Romantic ideology.

The test of a poetics is the poetry and poetic thinking that results.

In the case of the San Francisco Renaissance, and Spicer in particular, one has to start with the considerable, indeed stunning, successes achieved.

Maps — these schema so many of us love to create — have their primary value as imaginary constructions. Since art is not a fixed subject, it does not have a fixed group or series of objects, such as landmasses, to chart. Our critical maps make various possible configurations seem real; it's almost as if the dynamic, shifting field of the works is frozen by our icy projections onto them. Potentiality is taken for actuality.

Radical poetics thus shares with quantum physics or string theory a similar approach to the status of the objects of its scrutiny. In contrast, official critical discourse is rooted in a Darwinian methodology of classification and advancement.

The Darwinian model requires a relatively fixed idea of categories.

Yet as George Lakoff argues in *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, all categories — material or aesthetic — arise from "actual" human experiences shaped by biological and ideological and imaginative and mythopoetic predispositions and interactions. Categories are not logically consistent, a priori abstractions; rather, like languages, they are social and historical constructions.

I'm not suggesting that poetics, or poetry, is a chaotic system; though if I did, who among you would launch the first inflated balloon? We've flown about as high as we can and the air is thinning out, I feel descent is in the works, if you count your cards right.

Chaotic phenomena are not susceptible to rational analysis: they are unpredictable because they are nonlinear. This instability is the result of their "sensitivity to initial conditions."

I want to suggest that poetry, insofar as it charts the turbulent phenomenon known as human being, must reflect this in the *nonperiodic flow* of its "chaotic" prosody: clock time (regularized metrics) will not do, nor will structures that aspire to formal or structural (rationalized) stability or geometric conceptions of shape. As the stress of the world impinges on form, the uniformity of the flow rate is disrupted by interference patterns caused by bifurcation and oscillation.

Chaos in the heart can be dangerous — yet the stressed heartbeat, in which fibrillation makes rhythm unpredictable, is an image of the poetic line. Studies show that a chaotic electroencephalogram is a sign of healthy brain functioning, while a regular EEG reflects the pathological order of an epileptic fit.

Poetry in its most ecstatic manifestation is a nonlinear dynamic system. The vortex that poetics spins is a bubbling desynchronization chamber.

But poetic chaos, like the chaotic phenomena mapped by recent physics, is not absolute but constrained. It is controllable not in its flowering but in the progression toward chaos and the regression from it. We can study this progression into chaos, or move backward out of it: perhaps this is the narrative of a poem that poetics can address.

Here's my theory of surplus explanation:

Multiple incompatible hypotheses are needed to provide an adequate account of any phenomenon — aesthetic, material, or psychological. Which of course means no explanation at all.

I want to say that aesthetic objects are partly constituted by our maps of them so that this idea can be collapsed onto the way that a poem

constructs a world by stringing together a series of particulars: the syntax or prosody being the means by which we get from one place to another. That's what poems map: how you get from one detail to another — one morpheme or moment or element to the next. *A poem*, to appropriate Duchamp's phrase, is a *network of details or stoppages*.

Or else maps define and prefix — sclerotize — the domain of poetic activity.

We don't know what "art" is or does but we are forever finding out.

Sclerotic is a word I like very much. It means hardening, as for instance *arteriosclerosis*. — A word like sclerotize could have been just as big as "reified." It just didn't happen.

While sclerotic is a biological metaphor, referring to an organic process, reify is more conceptual — to make into a thing. With sclerosis you are still alive, just stiff, swollen, pained. The human is evoked by that — are the joints moving? — What did the Tin Man want? — not to be rustproof aluminum (a better machine) but to have a heart. Stiffness may run roughshod over the malleability of flesh, but the real sadness is to not have the heart to care.

Samuel Weber gives a lucid account of the sclerosis — he usefully calls it the *institutionalization* — of interpretative systems in an essay on Charles Sanders Peirce:

[D]espite the tendencies of semiotic processes to be open-ended and relatively indeterminate, determination takes place all the time, has always taken place, over and above the efforts of individual thinkers. . . . This is why Peirce develops the notion of the "real," "actual" or "experience" not as a given state of affairs, but as a violent shock, involving conflict, struggle, and resistance. Reality and resistance recover their etymological kinship in Peirce. The problem then becomes that of defining the conditions under which such a violent arrestation — in other words: institution — takes place [p. 20-21].

Now here's Luce Irigaray (tr. C. Porter with C. Burke):

In other words, the issue is not of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but one of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, or suspending its pretension to the production of truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal. . . . This "style" does not privilege sight; instead, it takes each figure back to its source, which is among other things *tactile*. . . . Its "style" resists and explodes every established form, figure, idea, or concept. Which does not mean

that it lacks style, as we might be led to believe by a discursivity that cannot conceive of it. But its "style" cannot be upheld as a thesis, cannot be the object of a position [pp. 78-79].

"In other words": which always points to these words and nowhere else.

I fly off the handle at right angles to my last thought and return to it only after much mileage and a lot of burned, smelly rubber.

In other words . . .

I have argued, here I go again, that the acceptance (reification) of formalist and New Critical "master" maps of modernism — by modernism's supporters and detractors alike — has, in some ways tragically, streamlined (in other words, institutionalized) an otherwise messy, polydictory arena of activity and precipitated an often farcical series of spin-off maps under the rubric postmodernism.

Formalist criticism provides some of the most detailed, and illuminating, readings we have of modernist visual art. But it is a map, not the map; one possible narrative not the master narrative.

Arthur Danto's essay on the "end of art" that concludes his thoughtful collection of essays, *The State of the Art*, provides an interesting case study of some of these issues. Danto starts with the Hegelian premise that art "in its highest vocation" will come to its end as it reaches maximum self-reflectiveness or self-consciousness as art, when, in effect, it turns into ("its own") philosophy and thus comes to its "natural end" as art [pp. 202, 208-209, 214-216]. He then notes that when he first saw Andy Warhol's Brillo cartons in 1964, he realized that art *had* effectively come to an end: the art object had become totally conscious of itself and could not be distinguished from commonplace non-art objects in the world. No further formal advance was possible; and while art might go on, art in the sense of formal advance could not — everything after Warhol would just be a footnote.

Even accepting this argument, it's hard to understand why art would not have come to end with Duchamp's readymades, thereby short-circuiting the very series of formal advances of the forties, fifties, and sixties that gave rise to Greenbergian formalism. Then again, Warhol made art identical not to any old objects but to commodities, which is not the same thing at all.

Danto's is not an argument for "postmodernism" but for the end of art; still it clearly parallels some postmodernist maps. For Danto, a hundreds-year-old Hegelian narrative of Western art comes to an end with Warhol. But as he says, though a narrative may end, it doesn't

mean the story doesn't continue (a narrative ends with "they all lived happily ever after" but the characters continue into that future). The activity continues but it doesn't have the same narrative necessity; closure has already occurred. This, then, for Danto, will explain the relatively bland pluralism of the eighties where no new movement usurps the formal stage every two years, just more or less interesting recyclings of the already known.

But this argument is based not on Western art's master narrative but a story Danto is attached to: not History unfolding but a story being told. The idea that art as an activity is completely absorbed into the Hegelian narrative precludes the possibility that there are other, incommensurable, "Western" stories based on different sociocultural and aesthetic assumptions. What Danto usefully documents in his essay is a certain cultural moment of acute awareness about art that changed his, and no doubt many other viewers', way of seeing all subsequent art. But this story can never be *the* narrative of art because art, even of the West, has no single story with beginning, middle, and end; indeed, new stories are being told every day. I'm telling one now.

These arguments suggest more a change of dominant critical paradigms for art than an end to art. Word has gotten out, and from different quarters with different agendas, that the critical narratives of art's history and contemporaneity are multiple and incommensurable (don't jibe). Yet this view reflects less an end to superexplanatory (master) narratives than a new superexplanatory (anti-"master") narrative.

When Warhol's "Brillo box asked, in effect, why it was art when something else just like it was not," Danto says, "the history of art attained that point where it had to turn into its own philosophy. It had gone, as art, as far as it could go. In turning into philosophy, art had come to end. From now on progress could only be enacted on a level of abstract self-consciousness of the kind which philosophy alone must consist in. If artists wished to participate in this progress, they would have to undertake a study very different from what art schools prepare them for. They would have to become philosophers" [p. 216].

One can only imagine a professional philosopher or critic — Danto is both — making such an argument and one might wonder if this isn't Danto's own "modest proposal," a subtly satiric critique of hegemonizing tendencies of recent critical theory. But Danto seems the most generously reasonable and least ironic of writers. So it will apparently have to be seen more as an instance of theoretical usurpation of not only the interpretation but also the grounds (the estate?) of art.

Yet it would seem, from Danto's argument, that it is neo-Hegelian

philosophy that has come to end, or anyway impasse, insofar as it can't account for the contemporaneity of art given its always-already defined conception of what art is. "Progress" is the loaded term (turn), but it may not be contemporary art's most important product. The messiness of the current art scene is at least a progressive critique of the narrowcasting of neo-formalist and "postmodernist" criticism; but it's not messy enough. If Warhol brings us to a dead end it's not because art, in its highest vocation, has ended but that we need new maps, new kinds of maps, of the past hundreds-of-years that don't lead to the inevitability of this sort of reductivist closure or conclusion.

If your map tells you you've reached the edge of the world and better turn back, it may not be that the world has ended but that your map has failed you. Even the idea of globes is not enough.

I take Danto's argument more seriously than many of the more fashionable ideas about the postmodern break because he has focussed in on many of the assumptions — the lenses — through which I was taught to view the Western art tradition when I first consciously began to encounter it under that name. Strangely, though, this argument makes me see the Hegelian conception of art's history not as the end but a beginning. Duchamp's, or Warhol's (the names seem dictated by the discourse in a blinding ferocity of repetition) (or Martin's, or Malevich's, or Manet's, or Reznick's, or Twombly's...) [or Stein's, or Benjamin's, or Celan's, or . . .] self-reflexivity *marks* not the end of art but a *preface* to what is now possible.

Emerging from the long tunnel of totemized historicity, we come face to face with the materiality of language and the identification of — or, better, transference among — art and its others. These are, so to say, foundational projects for art. Though we may find that these foundations are being built directly under the castles-in-the-air that we have learned to call the history of our arts — that have soared, so to say, without benefit of our finishing touches (torches), to borrow an image of Thoreau's.

Yet with these foundations in view, we can begin to see the art of the present and the past in less categorical ways; begin to acknowledge art that includes "fourth world" (non-Western, non-Oriental, non-"developing") cultures and third world politics along with ethnicities and sexualities often excluded from our "own" world; the arts of the East and of the West, North and South (Canada and Mexico for two). It means that we can stop thinking of art in narrowly "progressivist" lines, as if advances were something to occur at yearly intervals rather than be constantly discovered/revealed both at every moment and in every geographical region of the world, every time in human history:

a deepening conception of art that takes its time as in some ways synchronous in respect to achievement, although completely bound to its historical and material moment.

Art's (perpetually) new beginning means that anything is possible and that there is an inexhaustible amount for artists to do. "[Our] capacities have never been measured," Thoreau writes in *Walden*, "nor are we to judge what [one] can do by any precedents, so little has been tried. . . . It matters not what the clocks say or the attitude and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake and there is dawn in me."

So little has been tried.

We control the horizontal, we control the vertical.

Philosophy, or criticism, participates in this adventure in culture reciprocally, equally; but insofar as its procedures remain rationalistic, tied to a clock's (or computer's) sense of sequence, its race is not with art but with its own discursive conventions.

"Criticism takes more risks than art," Donald Kuspit writes in preface to his recent collection of art criticism, "for it subsumes art's imagination in its own deconstructive imagination, which moves even more deliberately towards an uncertain infinity. Paradoxically, this gives criticism more impact and import than art, for it indicates that criticism generates a more dynamic sense of relevance than art — extends imagination into realms of relevance unimaginable in the art it addresses" [p. xviii].

Surely, this, finally, must be parody: of Nietzschean resentment of the train by the conductor. Or is it rather a critical endgame of desperation turned to hysteria, where to interact you must condescend, to take note you must take possession.

The man who drives the car is on top of the world, thinks he invented speed.

One imagines that a critic who feels this way will seek out works he feels superior to, whether or not he is. Surely, he will have difficulty confronting that which questions his cryptoauthority (his authority as decoder). He will miss the one lesson he might learn from art, which is never dreamt of in his philosophy: that no method, much less professionalization of method, has the answers. Art is still our greatest teacher of methodologies and we risk losing our ground when we forget what art teaches, that art teaches.

What do we talk about when we talk about art?

Art, man, he could blow!

No thesis advanced, many declined.

What remains is a series of related remarks.

— "I've had just about enough of your remarks!"

A good joke never wears out its welcome, its preternatural inapplicability.

Another interesting case study is the "Primitivism" show at the Museum of Modern Art a few years ago. One thing the curators seemed to be suggesting, by putting tribal works next to, for example, Picassos, was that these tribal works were as aesthetically beautiful as the juxtaposed "masterpieces" of modern art. But what might be more interesting than how tribal works can be understood aesthetically, or how "magical" qualities can be seen in Picasso, is how the very concept of art can be exploded in terms of function, ideology, and culture.

Imagine tribal societies making use of *our* art as culturally functioning.

This "other way around" is what interests me: how we can understand our art as not being "merely" aesthetic.

Tribal work — I take this from James Clifford — is *not* artifact, not evidence, not document, not aesthetic object. Then what is it?

The answer to that question might help us to understand what our art work is. Which we don't know. Because we don't know what the objects are, or quite what to make of them.

Not that we should.

Or we know sometimes and then lose it, need to find out again, only differently.

Let me come at this "all" from a different angle, introduce a new tangle.

Ben Friedlander, talking about Charles Olson in a letter, makes a useful distinction between discovered and received traditions. While Olson went about finding his sources in a particular, even idiosyncratic, way, the danger is that the results of this process can be turned into a core curriculum of poetics, assigned readings and all, along the lines of what Pound actually advocated.

Recently, a scholarly poet friend was telling me that he thought he would have to undertake two years of background reading in philosophy, literary theory and linguistics to find out what $L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E$ was all about. In which case he would have read far more comprehensively in this area than most of the poets published in $L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E$.

The point is not to retrace the steps but to respond to the process of discovery. The idea that you've got to read what I read, or what he or she reads or read: awful nightmare of sameness.

"If you can't sleep at night it's not the coffee it's the bunk." You'll

remember (or maybe not) that this line wins Dick Powell the coffee company's contest for best slogan in Preston Sturges's film *Christmas in July*.

It could be that the distress generated by ideas of underdeterminacy, relativism, closureless poetics (double tromboley or open pocket), antiabsorptive poetry . . . are not the reasons we're not sleeping, nor getting our accounts straight. It's not the coffee (in the sense of these alternative modes of communication). It's the *bunk*.

So you either get a new bed or get rid of the bunk, in the other sense . . .

. . . and start talking sense to the *American* people . . . (shooting sense into the *body politic*).

Or maybe it's a way of trying to address the bunk, and yet the hostility is directed against the *coffee*.

To chart your way out of a cave you might want to use consistent syllogistic thought. But that's not the only problem we have. And it's not the only pleasure we can have. Sometimes judgment is at odds with analysis.

It is the continued fate of the contemporary to be misunderstood by some in exact proportion to the intensified comprehensibility it provides to others.

When someone says that they can't understand something, you can reasonably assume that someone else is going to absolutely be able to click with that, split infinitive and all. Making certain choices intensifies the communication for some while leaving others higher and drier than ever. This isn't elitist. Elitism suggests that there's one best way to say something, which conveniently segues either into the argument for mass communication: say it so that the most people will think they understand it; or for the sole legitimacy of the culture of critical discourse — only we can say it right. Our mutual incomprehensibility to each other is not a matter that can be legislated, or schooled, away: it is an active site of a democratic political process requiring negotiation not repression, translation not transubstantiation into a single common language above the fray of conflicting interests.

Over and against the claims of a radical poetry to resist or disrupt official critical and cultural discourse is the totalizing frame of the period, whereby even the most refractory cultural production may be interpreted as expressive of the contemporary cultural logic.

Reading poems under the frame of periodization is as reasonable as reading them in terms of the politics of their form. Such approaches

tend to neutralize aspects of the work that may otherwise be claimed as critique or attacked as random or nihilistic.

Fast cutting, fragmentation, polyphony, polyglot, neologism may all be features of late twentieth-century life, in some areas, as much as aesthetic "inventions." My linguistic environment might include, within the space of an hour, bites of Donahue on incest, street fights in several languages, a Beethoven quartet with commentary, calls to the phone company followed by intimate discussions of personal affairs followed by a computer-voiced marketing survey — with a Weil song interpreted by John Zorn in the background, seguing into close readings of Spinoza followed by a recitation of the Brothers Grimm.

When a poem includes some of these varieties of language use, it's not as if this is a totally synthesized experiment: you're listening to what you're hearing, charting the verbal environment of the moment. Of course, there are many choices you make . . .

It's because periodization is a compelling interpretive horizon for poetry that poets who do not wish not to acquiesce to this reading will find it necessary to speak up and make political claims for the work that otherwise might not be apparent. It's these claims that may make the poetry political insofar as they provide an interpretive wedge against the poem's newly apparent transparent absorption in its period.

The political frame provides a way of reading that might otherwise not be accessible, or not as accessible. The words, and their configurations, do not necessarily tell this story. The value of poetics is just that it can provide such an excess, or, better, complementarity of explanation.

Making the contemporary aware of itself, conscious of its own thought processes, is a necessary ground for the political. For this reason, a poetry's historical (structural) expressivity is a necessary but not sufficient measure of its values: it locates but does not determine, or exhaust, its political dynamic. An acute awareness of contemporaneity can produce (or abet) resistance: can provide information, in the sense of formal imagination, to readers. You have to understand what you're confronted with, have maps, identify the bunk — the virus coming into your system — know *what it is*, where that *what* is, as much as anything else, formal or ideological, and so *not visible*.

The new historicism and the "death" of the author are both useful responses to New Criticism and its many fiduciary and moral beneficiaries. Yet they are, largely, positionally and situationally reactive, providing for critiques that make possible a revitalized reconsideration of poetry as a complex sociohistorical *event*, recalling literature from

its long critical banishment to the nether world of freefloating texts. But I would argue not for the death of the author as much as for the exploding of a stable presentation of the author's identity, perhaps to reveal the multiple vectors (*including* intention and individuality) that constitute the author and the field in which she operates. That is, I am on guard against too literal an acceptance of these polemical arguments lest they become as reductive as that which they sought to redress: poems and authors disappearing as agents into the reified mist of historical determination.

Poets can operate as agents of resistance, poems can be sites of social struggle, in ways explicitly at odds with Romantic ideology or related New Critical doxa. Insofar as these new critiques erase all authorial agency in the name of structural causation, they extend the worst features of the New Criticism's depoliticizing of poetry. It's the one-two punch all over again: first the poem "itself" is shorn of its biographical and bibliographical and sociocultural wings; then unable to fly, it's assumed to be a half-dead thing, slapping around in the historical winds like so many Joe Palookas, read not for its substance but as barometric measure by the supercritics swooping overhead, looking for prey.

Whoa, Nellybell! Just a minute there. Not so fast.

I wonder if humor isn't getting lost in the shuffle, getting the short end of the rib, so to speak, playing backseat driver to anecdote on a slow trip on the back roads late at night in the dense, unforgiving fog. *Against seriousness as such*: Humor breaks the "high poetic" frame, showcases conflict.

— "But you're such a serious guy!"

Yet while irony and sarcasm can suggest an authoritative/controlling discourse, comedy can end up as so many Minstrel Shows of critical excess, where care, passion, and commitment become a kind of charade and real issues are turned into schtick: evading the kind of responsibility we expect from critical works.

— Humor, insofar as it destabilizes any unitary message, seems to undermine truth and authority. But that doesn't mean this approach to critical discourse eliminates the possibility of truthfulness or good faith or communication.

... any more than avoiding the most heavily traveled freeways of communication behavior means you don't want to communicate. Maybe you can get there faster going through the streets. Maybe you get out to walk. Maybe you have another destination in mind.

Maybe all the visible veins are already spent with hourly injections

and all you're doing is looking for a new vein to shoot into.
Is that comic or is that ironic?

Ten-second pause.

Blackout.

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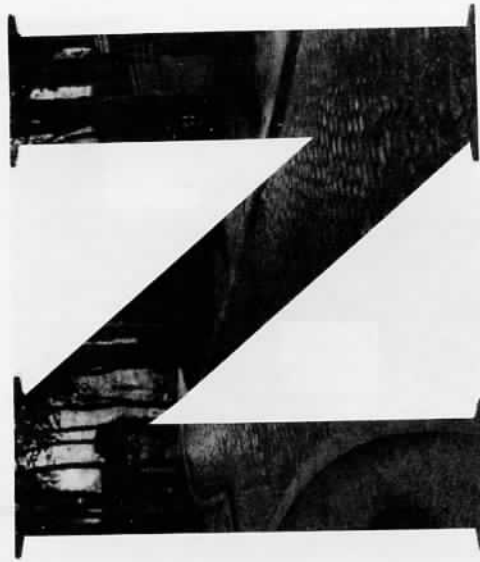
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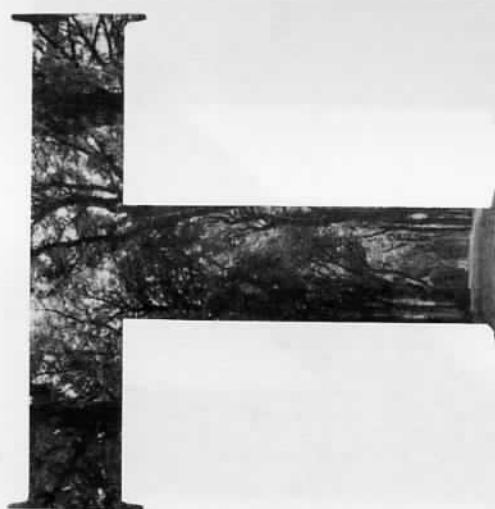
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