

An Interview with Raquel Levy

By Serge Gavronsky

Raquel Levy was born in Gibraltar. She has been co-founder and director of Orange Export, Ltd.,. As a painter, she has exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, in the U.S., Germany, Italy and most recently, a large one-woman show in Venezuela. She has also been the topic of considerable critical attention including catalog work by Marcelin Pleynet.

SERGE GAVRONSKY: For the past many years you've not only been a painter, with numerous and important shows and catalogs, but you've also been, as co-founder and director of Orange Export, Ltd., at the head of one of the most important presses in France, reading manuscripts and, as artistic director, interpreting these texts which you have illustrated. On top of all of that, you've also assured the mise-en page and the selection of typographical characters for your hand-letter press. Given these activities, this vision of the works of poets and prose writers, could you comment on the possible connection between the written word and that other "text" which is yours, and which also appears on the page? How would you describe this collaborative work between two types of expression, your own "écriture", if I can call it that, and the literary one which finds itself next to it? And perhaps you might say something concerning the possible determination of your own painterly vision through this familiarity with poetry and prose?

RAQUEL LEVY: First of all, it's a reading, it's something like music. There may be an aggressive relationship, currents, something which exists as a correspondence, an answer. It's always a dialogue. It's always a head on meeting of two things which theoretically are incompatible.

SG: I like that! How refreshing to admit incompatibilities!

RL: Absolutely!

SG: It's in the discourse since what appears in your own work has a distinguishing signature, and so, to place it in relation to a form of writing other than your own is, on the face of it, incompatible but in the succeeding

Fractal Geometry and the Poetry of John Perlman

By Susan Smith Nash

Can visual poetry be best considered in terms of fractal geometry? That is, the possibilities contained within unfold like a fractal coastline, where, viewed from far away, the edge seems smooth—like a simple curve. However, when you move in closer, you can see that the coastline is ragged, and the distance down it could be great, due to the innumerable curves and turns. The distance from point to point depends on how you measure, and how much you choose to smooth out the roughness and irregularity. Some fractal theorists, like Benoit Mandelbrot, argue that if every curve and ragged edge is traversed, with infinitesimal detail, then the distance is infinite.

John Perlman's poetics follow a similar path. On the page, they can seem spatially clean and linear, as in the two parallel lines of "Interrogatory" in *Eyes A Light* or in the arrangement of "or even if isolation was complete to itself" in *Images Beacons Within*, where, on first glance, the form seems to be a neat replication of the concept of isolation. The geometry seems to be Euclidean, with clean lines and symmetrical relationships, not fractal.

And yet, Perlman's poetics seem to offer a profound subversion of the linear (whether it be spatial, or verbal, as in the case of narrative), and admit the possibility of a fractal coastline of the interior, where the non-narrative arrangement of the words give rise to infinite possibilities of interpretation, while still allowing the reader to smooth out the surfaces, and consider only the "macro effect."

The study of geometry involves the close examination of surfaces, and it follows that a poem that has been crafted to conform to a specific geometrical shape requires a contemplation of surfaces. In his work with fractal surfaces, Theodor Schwenk proposed that there exists a certain universality of shapes in nature—for example, a flame, a leaf, and a stream channel all exhibit certain characteristic forms, and that what interested him was the seemingly endless repetition of these geometries. In analyzing rivers, he looked at the water in motion, and proposed that a flow equals shape plus change, a dynamic of motion and form. Thus, the river channel

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Raquel Levy...

moments, something interesting does happen: what you do is evidently not the same from text to text and there goes the dialogue between two silent partners!

RL: That's it! That's what makes it interesting. It's right there. Every time to connect with something different and strange.

SG: When you were evaluating manuscripts, were you always conscious that you were going to accompany the text with your own art work? Was that something you knew from the start?

RL: That depends, not always. Sometimes, a text made me want to do something. There were others which bothered me. I placed silence there because they were too talky.

SG: Then it really was more than a dialogue! Perhaps a dialectic relation ...

RL: No doubt. It involved a game played out by two persons. I remember how we were having fun with Mathieu Benezet who had given us his text and had, in fact, designed it himself. That is, he had placed a few words on top and on the bottom of the page and then on both sides, and hardly visible, and I don't exactly remember what I did, but you see, his was a form of provocation and we had a lot of fun with it! I responded in the same way.

SG: If you had to define—what a curious question!—your poetics in terms of your own art work, if you had to describe to a reader unfamiliar with your work what you did, how would you go about it? What would be the characteristic traits which might, clearly in a limited manner, translate your work in verbal terms?

RL: I often answer that in my paintings, there's nothing. What interests me is silence and thus, in general, this means an effacement.

SG: Do you think that in the group of poets and writers published by Orange Export, that particular definition of your work partially determined the selection or, as a second possibility (though not a mutually exclusive one), at a certain moment in time, both you and the contributor worked through the question of silence, of absence, of nothingness, the ineffable, the void rather than opting for the monumental, the lyrical, the play on subject? Might that transcultural pact have even preceded the dialogue?

RL: Well in the beginning, since I worked especially with Hocquard, we worked in perfect harmony. Our work was similar. We were working in the same direction, confronting similar problems. Later on, I worked with people who were very different one from the other and very different from myself. I never wanted to make of our small press something of a closed thing. Besides, I was the one who always threw things into a state of disorder! I always came to break this sort of harmony that we had finally come to discover among a

group of friends. It was truly marvelous. We talked endlessly but I loved to open things up and since everything was always mixed up together, intermingled...I remember parties where I invited people who were all completely different! That's what I was interested in.

SG: When you look back on your work, the work which appeared on the facing page, or in the center of those beautiful little pamphlets, apparently independent of the work in language, could you say that your work as an illustrator bore some relation, had a certain influence on your own painterly research?

RL: Yes, yes there's no division there. Absolutely no separation. One leads to another and, for example, I'd be painting in my studio and I'd remember there were gouaches I had worked on and which were on the floor and Emmanuel would come in. He would immediately feel the need to write down a text about them. He wrote them. A book came out of that. And later, I painted as a result of that. As you can see, it was always intermingled. There was always a sort of dynamics between the two. A going from one to the other. I never felt a division between them, my painting, and all the while what I was doing for one of the books. They indeed represented a different type of preoccupation, a different way, but they never existed apart.

SG: You're talking about content, and perhaps even about a certain metaphysical interest, but in the case of Orange Export, there was also a very deep commitment to typography. There's a splendid aesthetic preoccupation evident not only in the way the page was designed but in the very typographical characters selected which raised, on a visible plane, the scriptural presence. And next to that figured your own interpretations. One might even say that, in a given book, there were always two levels of the visible: the legible and the visible.

RL: Absolutely! That's a very difficult but perfect relationship to find. In the same way, I could say that when I worked on my dyptichs, at a certain moment, there was something which assured the music of both, where the two sides were in communication. If not, then there were two distinct paintings. And there, the text plays in the same way and so does typography. I remember when I was working on Marcelin Pleynet's book, I had changed the original typography because I really didn't like the spacing and I had asked—just to be perfectly sure (I usually don't do that)—but Marcelin has an excellent eye and, therefore, I wanted to, and I said: "It's not working. How do you see it? What are your suggestions?" And he did exactly what I had proposed, to the millimeter! He chose the same characters and the same spacing. That's just the way it had to be because it was the right choice. And that is a fascinating thing!

SG: Which reminds me of a discussion I had with Marcelin a number of years ago about the way reproductions of details of paintings are presented in catalogs and art books. The very nature of the painting is tricked when the detail appears as a full page reproduction! That really

shows a blatant ignorance of the meaning of the whole! In the case of most books which you've published, though I'm certainly not familiar with all of them, there seems to me to be a preference for a reduced format.

RL: That's right.

SG: While your own canvases tend to be monumental.

RL: Right!

SG: How then do you see yourself, without being redefined, operating with a restrictive space, a space which reduces the size of your vision?

RL: It really is a question of proportions. That's true. I'm most at ease with large canvases, the larger the better! Certain of our own books gave the impression...

SG: All the while being diminutive...

RL: Yes, they gave the impression of size! I really don't know how to put it into words, but I know how to see it. There's no incompatibility at that level.

SG: Even though your canvases tend to be monochromatic (though not always, and certainly not all the work in the books themselves), they are all rich in color. Color is a primordial concern of yours; they do not only figure as element of form, but color. Is there a relationship which can be established between the written text, the poem, and what you suggest on the level of color? You previously spoke about music: can you be more precise about that? Is there a way of putting into words something which appears to me to be nearly impossible? Is it a pure non-transmissible sensation? A reaction which tells you that, in this particular instance, black or white shall dominate?

RL: There are texts which are colored; and therefore, you can highlight that, place that into a color relief which might be seen as an absence of color (in the poem) and which can be brought out.

SG: What do you mean when you speak about the "color of the text?" Clearly, you're not talking about a poem, like Eluard's, which begins "The earth is blue like an orange."

RL: Of course, I'm not!

SG: Then how do you explain this highly accurate matter of the color of writing? It's not only a subjective decision; you don't say to yourself, "Today, I'll select this or that color" Something in the text speaks out at you and there, the adequation occurs.

RL: Isn't that a sort of vibration?

SG: I'm totally in agreement, but how can we go further and explain this vibration? I realize how difficult it is to put into words two systems of figurations one verbal and the other one pictorial.

RL: Things have got to be properly threaded together or the work rejects it. It really depends on the type of writing facing you.

SG: When you arrive at a solution, adequate to your own aesthetics and desires, do you ever consult with the poet or the writer or does he or she remain outside of this eventual collaboration?

RL: Outside! It remains a surprise except at rare times, such as when Emmanuel and I worked out the thing together.

SG: Proximity seems to play its part!

RL: We had fun making texts. We looked for something and we fabricated it together but, in general, the poet was not consulted. Not at all.

SG: When you look back again, touch, see, think about those books, do you still feel the same "vibrations?" When you look at what had been your own decision, do you still say: "That's fantastic." There weren't any other possibilities." Or do you ask yourself other questions, later on? Does the retrospective glance play its part in the critical perception?

RL: It's no longer my book. It came out of me and then I look at it as something else, which can surprise me, astonish me or again appear to me to be indifferent.

SG: During the time when you were working on those texts, were you conscious of certain verbal echoes? I'm not speaking about the themes of the texts, obviously, but were there resonances emanating from the text, from certain words able to suggest images, colors? As a painter, you don't necessarily have the same response a reader might have when he or she approaches a text and looks for ABC. Can you describe that? Is it the blankness? The lay-out?

RL: There's never a mise-en-page beforehand. I received the text and then I defined its placement on the page.

SG: But what happened when the poem, as it is most frequently the case, already contains its spatial definitions, if the surface of the page has already been sensitized by a topological distribution.

RL: That's what occurred with Benezet but it's very rare. And with him, there was a high degree of complicity since we worked closely and thus when he threw his conundrum at me, we were both able to work it out! That may have been the very first time something like that ever happened. In general, I would get either a written or typed script. Of course the poem has its form. Usually, there were five little texts. But as far as I was concerned, what interested me was the difficulty. I panicked in the beginning but then it came! There's no other way of putting it. It's there. It's not a highly thought-out process, but that's the way it happens.

SG: There's an authenticity in that reply! When I said there were colors in your work, you mentioned the existence of the colors in the verbal works, too. Can the same thing be said in the reverse, that is there a verbal tenor to your colors? When you paint, do you verbalize your topics? You mentioned at the beginning such words as absence, nothingness, but this nothingness is obviously rich in words.

RL: At times I begin a canvas with an extremely colored surface, with a great sense of movement and then I suppress that, I place everything in order until I reach the void. During my last exhibit, I had fun showing

some of these preliminary stages, showing canvases which hadn't been totally finished. That was fun since it represented the nether side of the final work.

SG: The palimpsest of the canvas! But those were elements you kept in a perfectly lucid decision. You were having fun and you wanted to leave a sort of testimony: "this is how I work" type of statement! Let me now ask you a final question. When you look at what is being done today both in writing and in painting, how do you react?

RL: Quel horreur! I mean, it's difficult to say, of course and there are things which are happening, that are rising to the surface, but what's being done right now seems to me to be horrible!

SG: Well, we'll end on that definitive note! Thanks Raquel.

John Perleman *(continued from first page)*

becomes a fascinating complex of whole surfaces interweaving spatially.

Because reading involves the motion of the eye on the page, and further, it requires the flow of thoughts, triggered by the marks on the page, then it might be said that reading a visual poem involves an analogous activity. That is, the poem becomes a form in motion, and its surfaces interweave to create geometries suggestive of other similar manifestations in nature, giving rise to the possibility of analogy. So, a poem about geological strata that takes the form of lines of text layered one over the other takes on an inescapable resemblance to the form as it appears in nature. Thus, a poetics of surfaces may suggest something about the process of forming analogies, and heighten a self-consciousness or awareness of that particular logic process.

Further, the creation of analogies involves what fractal mathematicians refer to as scaling structures, that allow one to posit that the same relations exist at any scale. So, Perlman's visual representation of isolation in *Images Beacons Within* might be carried into the natural world as a model of an island off the coast of a continent, isolated by ocean (or white space on the page), or, it could be applied to the figurative world to represent the mental processes of separation, spinning off, fragmenting, and isolation that occur in both the cataloguing and creative processes.

These representations can function as maps, or in the poem, "Images Beacons Within," to guide, illuminate, or reify an unconsolidated mass of data.

A poem that is about to be placed into motion by the action of the reader's eyes on the page could be considered to be filled with *potential energy*, because it has not yet begun to move or transform. The reader begins to move with the text, to activate the flow of words and significations, then a *phase change* begins. To analogize, it resembles the shift from laminar flow to

turbulent flow, where a continuous spectrum of different frequencies and wave-states charge the atmosphere with a random and chaotic energy.

It was precisely that moment of phase change that fascinated the physicist and mathematician Libchaber, who was intrigued by the onset of turbulence. He noticed that turbulence often manifested itself in nature in a manner that seemed to anticipate a future condition. For example, he notices that water flowing toward a waterfall seems to break up in turbulence even before it enters the drop, as if it sensed the upcoming presence of a major shift of energy. Of course, this phenomenon could probably be rationally explained away in terms of back-flows and eddies, but nevertheless, the idea is rather fascinating, especially if you look at the time component of flow, and think of the flowing water as flowing time. What this means is that what is to come somehow affects the present—that the waterfall that lies ahead causes ripples in the here and now--

In *As Promises*, Perlman writes, "we of them as they / of us the fabulists," in a non narrative text that discounts the linguistic content of the verbal, suggesting that it may be appropriate to privilege the visual, to incorporate an "image of the same self." If this involves an activity by the reader, of looking at spatial configurations in order to derive meaning, it may supplant a sort of function-dominated way of thinking. In fact, narrative could be considered to be function-dominated, filled as it is, with internal expectations, and a logic-style that requires the reader to accept the tenets of obvious cause and effect.

In the narrative world, a Darwin-weighted bias tends to reduce everything to function or utility, because that entire economy holds that the individual thinks in order to survive, and change occurs as necessary, to adapt. However, in Perlman's visually-activated text, meaning is not a consequence of its narrative function. Instead, meaning may follow a reader-imposed pattern, or, it may spring randomly and spontaneously from the infinitely complex spatial relationships it follows in its bifurcations along an incredibly lush and beautiful interior fractal coastline.

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Leslie Scalapino in the Word Circus

The Return of Painting, The Pearl, and Orion: A Trilogy
North Point Press. 1991

By Jena Osman

RINGMASTER: What is the manner in which you participate? You, the crowd, here under the bigtop...indeed! What do you do? Because I am STUNNING, I will reveal the bludgeoning of your own responses.

WILLY LOMAN: You rotten little louse! Are you spitin' me?²

PETER HANDKE: (*on trapeze*) And finally the state of the world, which had hitherto been taken as intrinsic and natural, was seen to be manufactured - and precisely therefore manufacturable and alterable. Not natural, not non-historical, but artificial, capable of alteration, possible of alteration, and under certain circumstances needful of alteration.²

WILLY: Ah, get outta here...

BIFF: But I'm no good, can't you see what I am?

RINGMASTER: Your self converts into a stranger entity at this point. Transformation, the trick of the theater and certain frames, because the occurrence of understanding is possibly under such fallacious circumstances only. However, now we will watch *Death of a Salesman* on a very bad video tape which has been cut, spliced, warped. The noise in the room, the house from which we watch, is suddenly in Willy Loman's room:

BIF: POP!.

(*She seems to be outside fixing her lawn with something like hairspray*) [Scalapino, p. 69]

BIF: ...I'm a dime a dozen and so are you!

(*sirens, sirens, the two plumbers stamp up the stairs, "not that", in that circumstance allows for sirens followed by plumbers, the two sounds admitted to space and following the woman up the stairs, no it's the eye moving up the stairs, before the body and then the sirens*)

(*sigh of audience AH YES, that is how I am too, isn't it a sad shame how small we are...O*)

INTERRUPT /REWIND/EDIT/REPLAY

AH YES, this is how I am, incapable of being in this space and yet in it, is there a problem of dimension, or is it the fact that I have poles attached to my limbs? Willy doesn't have poles attached to his limbs, Willy must be in a dream...).

(*Brecht walks in, carrying the following sign:*

BREAK THE OBLITERATION OF THE DRAMATIC DREAM THAT IS CAPTURED BY THE HYPNOTIC EMPATHIC NARRATIVE. THE DREAM IS CAPTIVATION, A HOLLYWOOD SIREN.

He walks off.)

RINGMASTER: Now you are ready to meet the detective (the other) as detected by Leslie Scalapino. Although Scalapino refers us to the comic book, I would - indeed! - like to propose that the comic book is just another word for the tangibility forum of the circus, i.e. bigtop, variety acts, cast of oddities, you, me, this. The duality of response that Scalapino's constructions allow for, is similar to the response mechanisms created by particular forms of performance, such as the circus. However, in that you are reading this, it is a circus of objects (words), as opposed to one of direct empathic wonderment—

MOHOLY-NAGY: (*while being sawed in two*) Yes, I believe by duality you are referring to that particular body mechanism which arises at the shock one feels at the potentialities of one's own organism as demonstrated to him by other!

RINGMASTER: Well that's one way to look at it! But I speak more specifically to the phenomenon of object theatre: the puppet show, the poem (the comic book). On this scene, one endows a lifeless object with life and therefore one maintains a constant self-consciousness as well as a suspension of disbelief. The magic is that of attachment and detachment. It is this simultaneity of the lifeless (the comic book) and the other (the inside that contains the comic book) that allows you - my audience - to defy passivity—

BRECHT: INTERVENE! DECOMPOSE! EXPLODE! ESTRANGE! REVAMP THE OBJECT WORLD! HURRY TO THE SITE OF THE REAL SOCIETAL MECHANISMS!

RINGMASTER: And now for a balletic interlude with a guest appearance by Oskar Schlemmer.

(*Schlemmer re-enacts the pole dance, where all bodily movement is extended in space through the use of lengthy wooden poles. In this fashion, he creates for the audience a transcendent space.*)

(*applause*)

BRECHT: I DEMAND ATTENTION.

RINGMASTER: And thus begins our next act...(drumroll)...a stinging debate between Oskar Schlemmer and Bertolt Brecht concerning the merits of Leslie Scalapino's latest book *The Return of Painting, The Pearl, and Orion* (*applause*) With opening comments by our very special request, none other than the beauteous Heinrich von Kleist!

(*roar of applause. Kleist enters in a cape...but is it Kleist? In fact it seems simply a cape...a piece of cloth propelled by strings, in that it is beauty. He resonates into a gigantic microphone.*)

KLEIST: As you have often heard me posit before: the puppet has advantage over man, in that it can never be affected. Affection appears when the soul finds itself at a point other than that of the center of gravity of the movement. Since the puppeteer...when he holds his wire, holds no other point in his power but this one, all other limbs are what they should be, dead; they are only pendula that follow the pure law of gravitation; an

excellent quality, which we seek in vain with most dancers..⁴

(thunderous applause)

BRECHT: Remember my friends, that in your applause you break our illusion, and thus play directly into my hands! As to your opening remarks my good friend Kleist, I would agree with you essentially on the prize of the puppet - it is a tool that can never be diminished in its powers of alienation. However, I would like to propose that its lifelessness, its proximity to the ideal is in fact not where its merit lies. As with the essentiality of Scalapino's comic book, its object-ness is simply a control device. It is not until one recognizes the comic book as existing within a greater schema—a narrative, let us say—that the puppet (the comic book) becomes seriously active. I quote

Flatness was construed as (was made to be) a barrier put up against the viewer's normal wish to enter a picture and dream, to have it be a space apart from life in which the mind would be free to make its own connection. (Scalapino p.133)

Or, in other words,

There not being historical experience - is the comic book. (Scalapino p. 156)

As we all know by now, social change necessitates a knowledge that events are indeed historical, and therefore changeable. I therefore protest an opening presentation which links the ideal of the device called "puppet" with the material to be found within the Scalapino work.

KLEIST: Ah-hem, I was not finished...so grace returns again after knowledge, as it were, has gone through the world of the infinite, in that it appears best in that human bodily structure which has no consciousness at all, or has an infinite consciousness—that is, in the mechanical puppet, or in the God.

(Kleist disappears into the air)

SCHLEMMER: I really don't believe that we can dismiss the transcendent qualities of the puppet so quickly, Bertolt. I have been quoted as saying that "the human figure, plucked out of the mass and placed in the separate realm of the stage (the picture) is surrounded by an aura of magic and thus becomes what one might call a space-bewitched being." I believe such a creature can be found within the language of Scalapino. And does the comic book not function as such a separation frame? As is not the detective, the "she" who roams through the entire trilogy, in fact such a "space-bewitched being"? The comic book is often mentioned as that which is "outside experience"; and although this is not necessarily a good thing - in that it posits an ideal, and therefore lifeless state - it is also referred to as "the jewel."

it is necessary to them that experience itself be convention. then there is not meaning to it. that is fine. the jewel. (Scalapino, p. 180)

The jewel is an ideal construction; however, this in itself is not what creates its negative activity. The question

is to what degree is the jewel used and abused. Is it a distilled part with which we may understand the whole, or is it misrepresented as the whole (the narrative) itself? their saying that we're in narrative as constructed and that we should be outside of that - that that is lowly. experience is lower class we'll just be mad insane and not be inside. Their saying that we are constructed - and they're constructing it. (Scalapino p.211)

However, the puppet, the jewel, is indeed effective when a simultaneity of consciousness can be achieved, when the conflict of perception is recognized.

BRECHT: So, you are saying that in actuality the comic book represents a forum where the nature of objectivity can be evaluated and tested. "Objective" mediums such as newspapers, the CIA, and language itself can be measured in the seeming isolation tank of the lifeless frame. And what is truly superb in both of these mechanisms (i.e. the puppet and Scalapino's comic book), is that the ultimate emphasis is on—

(searing bright lights come up on audience)

YOU, the spectator, activator, participant, reassembler, intervener, code-reader, societal tailor, circus-eater.

(lights dim back)

SCHLEMMER: Well I don't know about that...

BRECHT: I knew it, I knew it! You are an anti-political art-for-art's sake ninny! Why should we look at your little dances? Why should we respect your views on a book as politically potent as that by Scalapino? Who are you, my little abstract clown?

RINGMASTER: Bile-check, Bertolt.

BRECHT: Oh sure, excusez-moi! What I mean to object to is your attitude toward's a spectator's passivity. You seem to have no desire to confront it as the menace which it has proven to be. Your studies in space, color, movement, they all seem to have what I hate to label as an "emotional preciousness"...an hypnotic distillation as it were.

SCHLEMMER: I agree that I have rejected the object of audience "participation" - but this does not deny the activity of audience "confrontation." And in this I believe I am most thoroughly aligned with Scalapino's project. You and I both are interested in the spectator's ability to achieve change through a recognition discovered in the course of critical observation of performance. However, the change you desire, is that which occurs outside the theatre, outside the self ("the comic book is to enable people always to be outside of experience") Scalapino, p. 202). I, on the other hand, am interested in inner transformation ("we do live inside" - Scalapino, p. 229). If one understands the elements of surroundings (the stage representing that), one will understand how they influence the person who wanders about in them

Perhaps I can be more clear through example. (re-enter Kleist, or is it just the cape of Kleist?)

Here we have for the moment, what appears to be a cape, or shall we say a large piece of fabric. If one looks

closely, or if one looks at all, the strings attached to the cloth are easily apparent. When the strings are manipulated from an invisible source (the source not being important in the current debate), the cloth commences to gesture. In calling such movement "gesture," I am endowing an object with life, personifying an abstract form as it were. The magic of this reception creates an empathic bond.

BRECHT: YIKES! Hasn't anyone here learned yet that witchcraft is sordid!

WILLY LOMAN: I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman!

BRECHT: It makes me wretch, this hypnotic cathartic rigamarole. Fog equals passivity, and emotion is just another reason not to think!

(KLEIST coughs, annoyed)

However, I suppose it is evident, that through its own materiality, the puppet is a tool for perception, as is the frame of the comic book.

SCHLEMMER: The empathic bond is necessary in order to plug the spectator/reader in, to create an identification. But it doesn't stop at that. Pieces of narrative draw us closer, whereas their flatness (the comic book) is a choice to deny perspectival entrance. In Scalapino, I find the mechanics of an empathic organization as well as the simultaneous "space bewitchedness" that allows for the necessary detachment of the "I" from narrative activity.

BRECHT: Ok, I can see our ultimate purposes diverge somewhat; however, I do agree with you in this: the perceiver (the reader) is the center of activity. There must be the opportunity to intercept that which allows the reader/receiver to disappear.

SCHLEMMER: And that activity derives from a simultaneous exploration of that which is inside and outside of the self.

(a huge clock appears and swings over their heads)

RINGMASTER: Watch the clock boys.

BRECHT: Let us just quickly discuss my favorite part of the equation, the "outside," that which denies the private, and that which I believe invites reason through the element of distance. We have not as yet discussed that which is most obvious...what is COMIC about the comic book? There is nothing that can better break up hypnotic tensions than a good joke!

(KLEIST slips on a banana peel, falls, does not get up, is only a cape)

Don't you agree Oskar?

SCHLEMMER: Yes indeed - the comic certainly adds to the charisma of distillation, distortion, the magnet...

BRECHT: The magnet? I'm just talking about "did you hear the one about the man who went to the shrink? He said doctor I don't know what's wrong with me, I keep seeing wigwams and teepees. The doctor says that's because you're t(w)oo ten(t)se!"

(uproarious laughter)

I don't know anything about a magnet..

RINGMASTER: Excuse me boys, but this just in...

SCHLEMMER: Wow, it's a telegram from Henri Bergson: "Were events unceasingly mindful of their own course, there would be no coincidences, no conjunctures and no circular series; everything would evolve and progress continuously. And were all men always attentive to life, were we constantly keeping in touch with others as well as with ourselves, nothing within us would ever appear as due to the working of strings or springs. The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, or automatism, of movement without life." STOP."

BRECHT: That must have cost a fortune.

(lights slam on)

And now ladies and gentlemen, with the express approval of Leslie Scalapino herself, we will have a dramatic presentation in true epic theatre style of p. 179 (one of my favorite passages) by none other than "the other": the detective.

(puzzled applause)

THE DETECTIVE: She is picking out vegetables in the market. People coming to the market in the evening. what is being said with someone there is that there is no content in a conversation

except coming to the market in the evening. we have a sense there is not interiority, which is being nothing.

there's struggling in her.

tired going out and lying down in the street. she's unable to move. she can't get back. she sleeps there.

lying huddled on the street.

then there's no struggling.

there is no relation between there not being interiority and the flowering corpse.

we have a sense of duration. no we don't.

there is no relation between the flowering corpse and the child

there's struggling

no struggling between the flowering corpse and the child. who's later.

she's doing nothing.

She's sitting in the coffee shop in the morning. The man comes in who'd hurled the broom handle stuck in the man running toward her. Had seen her there before.

He's aware and doing nothing.

(she bows, audience boos)

BRECHT: Bravo!! Bravo !!

SCHLEMMER: (to detective) And now if you would be so kind, perhaps you would perform one of my favorite passages?

(the detective nods affirmatively and begins.)

THE DETECTIVE: She is picking out vegetables in

(Continued on page 12)

Readings & Reviews

COAT OF ARMS BY CHRIS TYSH,
STATION HILL PRESS 1992, \$9.95

The title of Chris Tysh's book invokes a framework which is not the usual stuff of contemporary poetry, especially not among the more experimental writers. Images of heraldry, emblems, and ever, military display are at first thought unlikely topics suggesting as they do outmoded regimes of discipline or worse, the clichés of dungeons and dragons sensibilities. Tysh doesn't go anywhere near the latter goop, thank heavens, but she does interweave themes of militarism through theoretically skillful means which allow her to make use of the tropes in a feminist investigation of linguistic and social structures.

Tysh's work, like that of Jean Day, Barbara Henning, and Lyn Hejinian (to make an unlikely but not so unlikely line-up), combines subtle thinking with complex, richly worked language and represents to my mind the best of state of the art experimental feminist writing. Tysh takes seriously the theoretical proposition that the formation of individual identity is in relation to structures of language and that the ordering of the social universe within which we develop and function is inextricably bound up in the ongoing articulation for formative discourse. For women, this has particular implications — since our relation to the structures and orders of language necessarily carries the charge to analyze its role (language's) in positioning us in the hierarchies of power which permeate every aspect of our lives as lived — family life, domesticity, public roles and sexuality. An underlying premise of Tysh's work is that subjectivity is precisely the condition of formation in and through language,

and that no area of human activity is immune from the dynamic of this ongoing process. This applies even — and especially — to the domains of intimacy which like to make their claims for autonomy and immunity — as if sensuality, sex, and passion were released from the constraints of the social order, rather than elements of them at most insidious level.

Tysh's themes are bound up with her means — at every point in the construction of this work the structures of syntax, the patterns of grammar, the use of vocabulary help to establish, sabotage, attack and defend the positions she is intent on staking out. I read this work as a chronological account of development. The figures who appear in the work as characters, however abstractly they function as both points of autobiographical reference and symbolic resonance simultaneously, appear and reappear throughout the sequence of poems. A figure of a mother, a figure of a father, are established as the two psychic poles around which the oppositions of language organize themselves, though the writing of this work is emphatically not binaristic, or in keeping with the old-fashioned forms of structuralism. In fact the great strength of this book is its capacity to continually destabilize such norms or oppositions while making use of them as points of reference.

Tysh's themes are twofold — one set of images and linguistic propositions continually examines the relation between the writer and the codes of power conventionally associated with masculine power. Exaggerated into the tropes of militarism, these work to permit Tysh to examine the interconnections between the signs/symbols of power, linguistic and instrumental authority, and her own place of articulation. The father figure goes to war, is in a parade, participates in a military display to which the girl child looks with envy, trepidation, desire, confusion. What are the terms of a woman's power in relation to these emblems? Is there a feminist heraldry to be

acquired, used, manipulated in order to subvert the power structures of that patriarchal order. An arms/armor in which the artillery of feminine weaponry also functions thorough display to achieve, through its own encoded power? Or is the careful observation of this militarism and — by extension, the disciplinary orders of syntax, grammar, history, and strict chronological sequence — always only capable of "rendering" a definition of identity through opposition? Tysh erodes the boundaries which exclude her, the girl/child who grows to adolescence, into sexuality and womanhood in these works (though this book is in no way a coming of age saga, don't mistake me, though I do see these shifts of condition moving through the work). She erodes them by a poetics which establishes and then reworks, reconsiders, and, again, destabilizes—the place of a word within a sentence, a term within a language to which it may be foreign, or a sequence of larger structures.

But before I examine these a bit more carefully, let me mention the second theme because, in some ways, I associate it even more with Tysh's work as a whole — and that is the theme of sexuality. As in *Porne*, Tysh is intent in this work on examining that area of human socio-psychic activity — the domain of sexual fantasy, activity, sensuality and power dynamics—No, maybe "examining" is the wrong word — rather, interested in using that arena as one in which to call forth an analysis of, again, the dynamics of power which inform the operations of the Imaginary. Pulling together these two themes — gendered identity in relation to external signs/codes of power, and gendered identity in relation to interpersonal dynamics as they act out the dynamics of power — Tysh shows her allegiance to the forms of what came to be known twenty years ago as *écriture féminine*. For Tysh the rush of language which refuses containment within the normative rules of syntax is itself a feminist act, though I am not sure if

she would ground this in the same metaphors of physiology as Helen Cixous or Luce Irigaray, or characterize her engagement with this process as an intervention in the codes of language as they carry symbolic value. In either case, the fact is that Tysh's work is full of sentences which flow rather than resolve or conclude.

One quick example:

[...] At the piano
besides a chaise lounge a belief which sustains
in the last resort healthy suspicions, the fort/da
traffic of immortal trinkets, that portion of bread
left on the oilcloth after dinner, if any hardness
of flesh lies in the way it corrupts
the questioning glance (p.49)

A sentence, yes, and one which uses its words like keywords to index a whole series of interlocking frames of reference as well as move from a domestic scene to a psychic arena to, a moment in time as pattern/habit and back to the fixed instant of a glance carrying the penetrating power of a phallic association. Tysh's work continually elaborates poetics into a post-structuralist network of complexities. The rigid tenets of theory are all reformulated through the highly specific details of personal location which is the place of the imaginary. Representation in language as that site in which the subject brings itself into being — not the real but its imaginary. The skill of Tysh's relation to theory is that it is through language, and that she is able to use poetics to rearrange the critical regime.

It is in large part the denseness of Tysh's language which I find so satisfying. I am not always in sympathy with her artifices and conceits — I sometimes find her invocations of the feminine (feathers, flowers, etc.) clichéd in contrast to the intelligent subtlety of the linguistic structures. And the use of weird vocabulary — *autarky, vambraced, spastiba, semy, trippant, and nebuly* — sometimes moves this work into a gibberish patter of syllables so unloosed from semantic stability they lose all meaning for me beyond the wildly associative. But hey, those are small

points — and I'm willing to grant that my idiosyncrasies of style or squeamishness or even prudishness set different limits on these things than hers do.

In conclusion, I am profoundly in sympathy with Tysh's work, and with her overall project as I understand it — which is to continue to articulate a feminist claim on authority — cultural, linguistic, theoretical, poetic, sexual — through the activity of writing.

—Johanna Drucker

QUIRKS & QUILLETS BY KAREN
MAC CORMACK, CHAX PRESS 1991,
\$8

Why quirks and quilllets, when a quillet is a type of quirk, if a quirk is a verbal subtlety (wch wd certainly apply to Mac Cormack's poetry—but then why Mac and mack—her name indicating a certain supplementarity or excess (but fuck Bataille or Derrida, let's say a surplus value-added), & beginning & ending with a K, say), but you cd also say, or see, the quirks as grunts or groans, an alternate sense in the OED, wch is more amenable given the large typeface (18 pt) of the book, the quirks as rude, if not sexual, in(ter)ventions.

The Q is an attractive idea, the carry-over (literal, or letter-al) from *Quilldriver* (1989), as well as from the sound of *Straw Cupid* (1987). An accusatory tone, hectoring, warns the reader not only to take, but also give, nothing by mouth: "To salivate would rust the metal simulated grain intervenes a flag pole". If a flag pole looks like wood (but is actually metal) the salivating it proposes (our lust for wood, an ecopavlovianism) would destroy the real in the name of the imaginary, rusting away at the symbolic phallus, a flaked menstrual flow.

"In this way the body translates to taste or smell compared for lack of equilibrium" and I want to allegorize it—i.e. it's referring to all translation,

the taste leads forbiddingly to (again) something by mouth, or at least Bourdieu's idea of taste as a class boundary While Mac Cormack's text certainly provides a site for such interpretation, it's sometimes the easy way out (see the vacuousness of Easthope's *Contemporary Poetry Meets Contemporary Theory*), fixing the text so that the "difference" mentioned in a Susan Hicks Beach epigraph to Mac Cormack's book must irrevocably refer to Derrida's difference, or, in a more post-Language sense, to Stein's "the difference is spreading" (& Marjorie Perloff compares Mac Cormack's text to *Tender Buttons* in a blurb on the back, & there, too, Perloff speaks of Q & Q's "profound concern for the difference a word can make"). But a difference of (between) what? For the concept of difference, foregrounded in so many paratextual ways in *Quirks & Quilllets*, can slip too easily into a mere structural problem, & thus you have the difference of words (Perloff), of things like pinheads (Beach): difference, that is, as a non-dangerous concept.

A concept is merely the reification of dialectical inquiry, and difference is orthodoxly privileged in post-structuralism over identity in the same way that metonymy is privileged over metaphor. Mac Cormack's text does exploit metonymy gracefully, but instead of a metonymy of the signifier. (altho that too is present here, as in "a painting leans on a loan bricks minus cement lessen", where painting, bricks, and cement are all syntagmatically related (the category of some sort of wall (covering), as are leans, loan, and lessen in a more punning manner), she opts for the metonymy of grammar.

Each page is a sentence-paragraph (violating that hymen separating the two) wch demands that the reader construct breaks or connectives: This curious release of leaves the fugue among us delivered a personal number of hindsight currency restricts an ingenuity recorded in France while television insults anyone two more keys enclose space

within time so shells appear smoother on the counter of any slide into that wall between partitions current is infused forgers in formation.

Here, as elsewhere in *Quirks & Quillets* the clauses pile-up, not as discrete & parallel units, but blurring into one another, so that the apparent verbs (leaves, delivered, restricts, insults, enclose, space, appear, slide, partitions) serve simultaneously as connectives between noun-phrases and as breaks between clauses.

It all seems resolutely non-referential: a surplus of formalism that denies meaning or, in a more positive light, creates such a thicket of reading that we can no longer avoid the text by reading "through" it to "the world." & you can find passages in Mac Cormack that support this final, Adornoesque, interpretation, passages like "All passage fall lean-to diction paralyse the driven on their day off." The lean-to diction we're used to, that paralyzes us on our day off, is not what's here, a diction that must be learnt, a passage we must enter, while at work.

—Clint Burnham

TETH BY SHELIA E. MURPHY,
CHAX PRESS 1991, \$9

Violation contains ambivalence.

—Shelia E. Murphy

*To not finally know whether I am
reading or writing.*

—Clark Coolidge

It would be inaccurate as well as inappropriate to say that Sheila Murphy's poetry is penetrating. Rather, the poetry's efficacy rides on a type of serial persuasiveness. Murphy is fond of the paradox inherent in the intersection of the series and constrictive form. In *Obelt* (1990), each poem contains twenty-one lines, each of which is comprised of seven words. With *House Silence* (1987) includes fifty-seven haibun, a more elastic form in which Murphy continues to publish. She constantly tests her poetic energy against self-imposed forms that stimulate rather

than contain the poetry. *Teth* is composed of eighty-one poems, each of which are eighty-one words long. All the lines are centered on each page, and each letter is in the lower case. Rather than constricting the possibilities of her poetry, such form liberates Murphy from dependence on the lyrical ego to direct the process. Normative forms could not accommodate Murphy's plunges into the uncertain ground of poetic generation where she conducts "some ongoing conversation" (32) between "the weight and feel of melody" (28). Murphy interrogates the manner in which poetic language shifts its densities and how such mobility affects signification: "a distance / with the name taut string / that could be member of quintet / but is solitude / resourceful as the humble monk" (23). It is such resourcefulness that keeps the both poet and reader in motion in the play between the single and the ensemble. The series gives Murphy the freedom to operate on the horizontal axis of language where she breaks down sequential events and recombines them to break open renewed possibilities.

Murphy brings an attentiveness to the quotidian and protean landscapes of distances and immediacies: "if I speak to melody around me / dump truck / slaphappy birds / exhaust / some weakly snarling pets / uncoffeed humans / sponge headphones." Linked to her ability to render such details of the daily is Murphy's desire to follow the sonar texture of language as it fires the synapses in continually surprising ways. In the same poem:

*live antenna branches
fortify lawn minerals at night ahead
core epoch seeths pronouncement
morning glory sifts edges
of imposter ruins
voice chain link protection
from the mass without possession
of enough imagination to transcend
sound
corrupted how the mind is
music*

(48)

Such an elasticity of admission gives Murphy's *Teth* the virtue of an inclusive response to the objects and events of the culture around her. The poet sifts the ordinary edges of things (antenna, lawn, and morning glory) to recuperate extraordinary poetic responses (how the mind is / music). The innovation in Murphy's line inheres partly in the combination of rather simple diction—"voice chain link protection"—with more complex diction in the next two lines—"possession," "imagination," and "transcend." More importantly, because she avoids any punctuation in this series, the reader must establish a line's pacing and its propensity to shift from endstopping to enjambment. Is line five above endstopped or enjambed? "Similarly, what kind of punctuation belongs between transcend, sound, and corrupted?) Murphy allows the reader full play in this context. In conjunction with this issue of the line break, if we read ruins as a verb, we get quite a different sense than if we consider the word a noun. Since both possibilities might fit, Murphy's approach to poetry is self-consciously polyvalent and provisional. Embedded in the chain of signifiers is a cultural critique of the way most of us construct barriers (chain link protection) against the world. Far from hermetic, Murphy speaks consciously to the contemporary scene around her, but since this world is, at times, a complex of moving fragments, it must be confronted by a poetry of multiple intelligences, critically able to create a language that resists the daily onslaught of rhetorical shoddiness.

An oscillation between poetic "statement" and poetic "indeterminacy" gives Murphy's work a sense of critical tentativeness:

*sufficient ink to persuade others
this is happening
the war on scant resources
motorcycle jacket defining closet
as the fundamental cave
until it echoes expert system*

is then ever replicated
 in the segregated closets of America
 who rule out shawls of nuns
 masculine ear muffs
 and the pea coat of a trench man
 laboring to earn distinction
 without capacity to sell it
 (69)

Murphy does not persuade by feel-good morality, but instead by combining bits of torn speech and fragments of social discourse with a lyricism that is alive to the vocalic music of the interior line. She dramatizes the reproduction of patterns in a cultural economy overwhelmed by the patriarchal value of domination. The oppression of otherness has become such a hot topic in contemporary social discourse and poetry that Murphy embeds her critique in a language that estranges the commonplace. She throws into stark outline the struggle to closet gender and otherness. Murphy collides motorcycle jacket[s], "shawls of nuns," and "masculine ear muffs" in a way that provides a witty commentary on the confusion of gender in the contemporary economy of dwindling resources. Simultaneously the competition of the overspecialized job market ("expert system") has accelerated to the extent that exchange of currency in this economy has become short-circuited.

While I have emphasized the cultural elements of her work, I must also add that Shelia Murphy's poetry operates in mercurial registers that demonstrate an aliveness to risk and experimentation. At once instance, we get the biting and hilarious "award winning concupiscence" (45) and at the next, the cunning and adroit "ambidextrous sightseeing" (46), "as if dance were parody of light" (67). Murphy is argus-eyed, and her invigilation involves a kind of spiritual exercise that "breed[s][the] world from raw resources" (21), while "sanctifying grace pours down like blood" (27). Elsewhere she writes that "sacrament is knowing / how to translate / leisure to a spiritual work"

(44). And Murphy performs her poetic work as a meditative attention to the "tone complexion" of her language, which emerges in a "promenade of images" (36) that open and transform in front of us. Shelia Murphy balances her quiet attention to the music of language with a sharp observation of the social text.

--John Tritica

WEST OF MASS BY JIM McCRARY,
 TANSY PRESS 1992, \$8

One of the best, most recent publications to come out of the Kansas Magic Realism School is Jim McCrary's *West of Mass*. True to the heritage of ritualistic regionalism that gave us vortex landscapes where the episodic nerve was wired to fast association, the Hobohemian experience of the benaery and tough flat noir of Belle Starr and Salt Chunk Mary lives again. After all, the Turk left Coronado stuck out there, and every good magician knows how to create a legnd when nothing else is happening.

It is no wonder that Burroughs lives in Lawrence, and encouraged this production. The illustrations by S. Clay Wilson will alert the readers to what scenes may follow. "Hippy Jim" might now be drinking red beer at Sporty's, with a half-white Kickapoo, but we still taste the flavor the the old Rock Chalk Cafe, or the years and names before that, which keeps that realism wired; as in his description of the Dalton brothers putting on a show in Coffeyville, "The term wired / applied to any other than / Emmett, Bob, Grat and Bill / is ludicrous. Look it up pal. Look it up."

He asks the reader for the freedom that clarifies kicks...or there's always Charlie Starkweather, or Bat, or Jessie, or those hair-triggered legends of his poems. He deliberately pushes pathos to the flash point where he gets inside the "wired" and doesn't just inject wired as a meta-

phoric caffeine/amphetamine past-beat familiarity, but rather a metaphor for the magic realism like in the wires that the storm left sparking and shooting around on the ground, as if he "Can't lay anything down / there is no down left."

Though some of his poems require that special Kansas wild esoteric-humor to full appreciate, most of them bring it right home as his "S&L Updated," in which he has Bonny and Clyde come down on a bank with Neil Bush behind the desk. Or his "Quien Es (?) Indeed," which is illustrated by a great S. Clay Wilson rendition of the classic portrait of Billy the Kid and his past and current lovers, full of holes or not, "Here stands William Bonney / like a lot of us / at the apex of a career / and in the middle of dilemma..." Some of his most accessible poems mimic the conversations of cowhands playing a little poker or crawling into the bunk:

"Film Noir"
 With a name
 like "Sundance"
 how could you
 be anything but
 a "kid"
 and sleep with
 anyone but
 a fellow
 named
 "Butch."

Jim McCrary works the Kansas idiom into his realism and draws special attention to associative levels of meanings or double meaning, reminding us of a Kansan who doesn't want to waste any words, or a gun-fighter who lets his riding (reading) partner take it any way he wants it. In his poem "Doc" he uses Doc Holliday's words, "This is Funny" to comment: "No doubt about it / the man had a way / with / shotguns / and meta-physics."

--Charles Pymell

Circus (continued from page 7)

the market. People coming to the market in the evening. what is being said with someone there is that there is no content in a conversation except coming to the market in the evening. we have a sense there is not interiority, which is being nothing....

(As she repeats the same passage, the lights dim out and various words and phrases from *The Return of Painting, The Pearl and Orion*, stream inflorescent white across the ceiling like a fireworks display:

*knowing who are friends...
of the popular social...
you 're corrupt or you 're weak...
this can be free...
is calm...
there isn't life...*

*from the lower class...
no place to dream...
experience itself is a convention...
it comes from experience...
completely free...
one frame at a time... etc.)*

- 1 Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*
- 2 Peter Handke, "Brecht, Play, Theatre, Agitation," *Theatre Quarterly* (Oct. - Dec. 1971), p. 89.
- 3 Molnar, Farkas, ed. *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT., 1961, "Theater, Circus, Variety" by Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, p. 54.
- 4 Heinrich von Kleist, "Essay on the Puppet Theater," Translated by Eugene Jolas. *The Partisan Review*, 14, no.1, pp. 70.
- 5 *ibid.*
- 6 Lehman, Arnold and Richardson, Brenda, *OSKAR SCHLEMMER*, The Baltimore Museum of Art, p. 51.
- 7 Henri Bergson, "Laughter"

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