

# J A B

NUMERO 6



## **Terrible Lurid News!** **Bloody Drama Erupts on Bookmongers Row**

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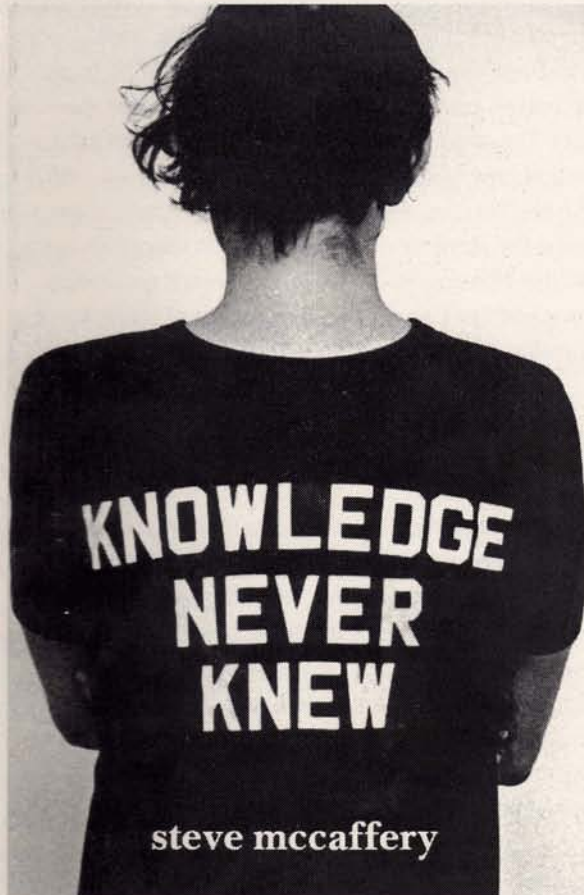
FIERCELY debated disputes among feuding book makers exploded into a riot of raining fisticuffs yesterday. It began when Mr. O stomped into Miss K's shop, tore the book she was stitching from her hands and vehemently exclaimed, "This is not ART!" He then flung the book out the window into the gutter. Miss K seized her sword, marched across the street into Mr. O's shop, skewered an enormous pink book which had been carefully set atop a golden pedestal and bellowed, "And this is not a BOOK!" She then

dashed it to the ground and trod with great ardor on its shattered wings.

Their unruly clamor and fracas caused other book makers to abandon their benches. In wrathful fury, Mr. O pounced onto Miss K. Immediately the street was teeming with contention. Mr. Z leaped into the fray with his customary exclamation of "Aha!", and gleefully began throttling Mr. O. Then Miss Q cried, "It's a fight to the death!" And at this, the street was a broil with flying books, rulers, fists, shoes, gluepots

continued inside...





Steve McCaffery, **KNOWLEDGE NEVER KNEW**, 1983, Véhicule Press

## INTERVIEW WITH STEVE McCaffery

Steve McCaffery is a Canadian experimental poet whose work concerns books, writing, visibility, and the meta-physical/theoretical investigations of these topics. I first became aware of his work as a poet because he was making serious visual books — that is, books which were serious poetry and were seriously involved with visual format, typography, and presentation on the page. As I have gotten to know him, and his work, more thoroughly, the extent of his interests and the eclectic 'pataphysical' turn of his mind have become increasingly evident. His work is erudite, playful, engaged, and engaging in every respect. Though McCaffery is first and foremost a poet,

his involvement with the "book" as an idea permeates many aspects of his work, and has since he first began working in Toronto in the 1960s. At that time he formed a working relation with bpNichol, a fellow experimental poet, in a partnership to which they gave the name "Toronto Research Group". Under this rubric they produced creative/critical and performed works — many of which are available in **Rational Geomancy: The Kids of the Book Machine. The collected research reports of the Toronto Research Group.** (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992). An excerpt from his work **Carnival: Panel II** (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1978), a book constructed in single page "panels" which are meant to be taken from the binding and assembled on a wall, was shown in JAB4. This interview was conducted on email in the summer of 1996.

"The term 'pataphysics comes from French poet Alfred Jarry, a turn of the century writer who defined the term as "the science of exceptions." See below.

Johanna Drucker: My sense is that the ways you as a poet have thought about "the book" could be of interest to artists working with books as their primary medium. For instance, in **The Cheat of Words**, your new volume of poetry, I read "A Book: For Mallarmé" which seemed on the one hand like a wonderfully imaginative free-for-all of associations in which you let everything you can think about what a book is be condensed into the text — and on the other hand, it seems like a densely informed, highly scholarly compendium of material in which the history of books as artifacts, as production, as conception, as stuff is all explored. But you don't mention the phrase "book machine" in this poem — could you talk about the ideas of the book which informed that earlier phase and then the ideas about the book which appear in **The Cheat**?

Steve McCaffery: The concept of the book-machine was jointly shared by myself and bpNichol under our collaborative cloak of the Toronto Research Group. Mallarmé had provided us with an exciting precursor in the notion of the book as spiritual instrument. What we desired was to shift focus from transcendence and spirituality to the

guaranteed to change your consciousness

materiality of book as a functional object. The mechanical aspects we designated were fairly basic: pagination, cover, hypertextual components such as indexes and footnotes, and sequence and consecutivity. But we also reported on the many innovations-especially in the world of children's books (pop-up, scratch & sniff, records embedded in a page and played by turning a cardboard handle and needle, etc.)

We examined the book-machine too as the site of contestation with the machinic norm, and our Report 2. Narrative Part 1 in **Rational Geomancy** documents such material-mechanical innovations at that time known to us: B.S. Johnson's novel **The Unfortunates** comes to mind as a work that stridently alters the normative mechanics of the book by presenting the work unbound in a box as a narrative with predetermined opening and closing chapters, but with the positioning of all medial chapters determined aleatorically by the reader's shuffling of the text. This ludic intervention into the mechanics was key in our investigations.

My own work "Carnival" militated in its form against the bound sequentiality of the book-machine, replacing sequential line and page with a cartographically inspired typographic panel. There was an additional gesture of requiring the reader to tear out the sixteen perforated pages and put them together as a flat panel. In other words "Carnival" the book has to be destroyed in order to produce "Carnival" the panel.

An important aspect for me in all of this was the significance of McLuhan's concept of servo-mechanism - the often ignored contradiction that the machines and equipment of all emancipatory technologies carry with them a dimension of servitude. For the reader is both master and slave of the book, and to function pragmatically must obey all those rules that make the machine work effectively. The reader, in other words, is partly a predetermined function and not an ontological subject. This investigation of the book-machine did not address the book's ideological status in a complex logic of the commodity - a status I came later to address.

But you ask me what idea of the book informs **The Cheat of Words**. I would mention at the outset that it's concern was not primarily with the book-as-such and that it adopts most of the book's classical conventions. There are no innovations in typography, and the book conforms to a normative size and format. However, there are numerous discrete poems in the book which foreground book elements: the poem, "Dear Page", renders the material page both an intrinsic element in a current function and the object of address. A self-reflexiveness is thus intentional. "Instruction Manual" by virtue of its title suggests a book within a book, whilst the longest poem

"Teachable Texts" brings attention to a bookish function. The cover itself, incidentally, uses an image taken from John Harris's **The Infant's Grammar**, published in 1824 and designed for an infant audience. The piece "A Book: for Mallarmé" requires a more lengthy discussion.

To have some of my work considered as part of a Mallarméan legacy, part of that project announced in **Un livre** and "The Book as Spiritual Instrument" is a felicity. What I try to effect in this poem are a series of reductions and conflation whilst still maintaining the core prerequisites of the "book". Hence, in the poem the "book" is still announced as a series of sequential units called "pages". But "pages" are transformed into sentences that speak of pages. The spirit of the piece is both festive and exhaustive and runs counter to Mallarmé's other legacy - deriving from "Un coup de dés" - of concretism, spatialism, stasis and the absolute, which has been so important to the Brazilian Noigandres poets and the French concretists Pierre and Ilse Garnier and the concept of the poem as constellation first proposed by Eugen Gomringer.

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JD: When did you become aware of the Brazilian Noigandres group and the French concretists?

S.McC: In 1966 when I came across issue V-VI of **The Lugano Review** which included an article on Concrete Poetry by Mike Weaver. An Appendix to Weaver's article included a translation of the Noigandres Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry and the De Stijl's Second Manifesto of 1920. It was supplemented with texts by Augusto de Campos, Pierre Garnier, Rhum, Gomringer, Finlay, Houédard, Pignotari, Jandl, de Vree, Pinto, and - astonishingly - Robert Creeley's "Wait for Me."

JD: Some of the Brazilian concretists (and others - Emmett Williams, for instance) have used the book as a form but they don't seem to be particularly concerned with it as a metaphor. Do you know of any work by these writers which does make a critical inquiry into the book as a form?

S.McC: Ian Hamilton Finlay's "linguistic landscapes" in his garden at Stonypath are a powerful reinvocation of the medieval metaphor of the book. Among others Ferdinand Kriwet's poem "Wah Wah" replaces the book-form by a typographical environment, positioning the "reader" inside the text. Dieter Rot brings a self-reflexiveness to the book in his **246 Little Clouds** which exists in two versions. The original book comprises pasted texts and drawings in a blank book; they are held solely by a hinge of scotch tape, allowing them to be popped up to create shadows (Rot's clouds) in the right light. The published version

(Something Else Press, 1968) is a photographic reproduction of that first book whose method of reproduction is worth remarking. Each page, in fact, is photographed in a different light moving one degree per page from left to right. This, of course, builds in an illusion of passing time. There's much in Rot's other work that actively disengages the book's machinic mandates: drilled holes through pages, for instance, complicating any normative response to the page as a neutral surface. Another memorable book to me is Michael Gibbs' *Pages* which consists of 100 pages taken from 100 different books all of which are the respective page 100.

JD: Can you develop the distinction you made above between the two aspects of Mallarmé's work/influence and your own leanings towards "The Book" vs. "Un Coup de Dés"?

S. McC: I've always been intrigued by "The Book's" teasing urges towards the performative - as a total theatre of the book. Connecting with this is the notion of a "lived textuality" that was so central to Surrealist practice and developed in the perambulatory projects of the Situationists, such as the *dérive* (literally "drifting") which Guy Debord describes as "a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances." Michel de Certeau claims that "books are only metaphors for the body," suggesting that a complex corporeality underlies their social and cultural circulations and committing them—unavoidably — to performative implications.

It's salient to recall that two of the earliest "artist's books" involve the book in both transformation and theatricality. I'm thinking of the scroll described in Ezekiel [2:9-3:1]: "And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and, lo, a written scroll was in it; and he spread it before me; and it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe. And he said to me, 'Son of man, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.'" The literal consumption of a book [writing] is depicted as a preparatory ritual for a return to speech in prophesy.

Yahweh's "book art" — and I'm being only partly facetious here, because the biblical genealogy of book and the performative truly does lead up to Mallarmé — is repeated with adumbrations in the Book of Revelation. Like Ezekiel, John is offered a scroll to eat with the command that he then goes forth to prophecy [10:2-10:11]. But Revelation adds a second, different book, sealed with seven seals which is to remain unopened. To me this carries a profoundly Mallarméan resonance: the book as a limitless text that grants to the written through a negative

excess — "I'm so powerful you can't even read me" — an absolute sovereignty over speech. Ezekiel and Revelation also suggest that Mallarmé's great achievement was more to repeat and modify, rather than inaugurate, a moment in the historical complicity of the book with the performative. I recently received a brilliant work from a young Ontario artist, Peter Jaeger, that consists of a varnished book, the edges of its pages sealed with a clear but powerful epoxy such that the book can never be opened. Pasted down on the cover is a short passage from Kierkegaard: "to write a book and revoke it is something else than not writing it at all ... to write a book that does not claim importance for anybody is something else than leaving it unwritten". The repeat of Revelation and Apocalypse here is absolutely clear.

But I digress. To return to the matter of bibliophagy I recommend the reader to a splendid summary of that tradition: Michel Jeanneret's *A Feast of Words*. My own work in this area achieved its best success in a short performance called "Erasa" in which I improvise around various commands addressed to me and involving my response to a poem on a page in my hand. The final commands are "Eat the page" and "Put all the pieces in a box".

But to move to the second part of your question; the matter of Mallarmé's other great text "Un coup de dés". Its relationship to "Le livre" is almost antinomial; its urges are the opposite to those of "The Book". I would say it's the groundbreaking, unprecedented presentation of a text as an irreducibly graphic experience; of an absolute interplay between white space and impressed marks. And this in 1897! It's inspiration to visual poetry has been legion and it's fitting that in 1997 a huge exhibition is to be organized in Verona "One Hundred Years of Visual Poetry" to celebrate the Mallarméan legacy. For Paul Valéry, who read the poem in 1897, the interplay of blank and occupied space carried cosmological resonances, repeated in the 50s and 60s in Eugen Gomringer's "constellations" and Pierre and Ilse Garnier's *spatialisme*. "Un coup" also introduced ontological tremours into the relationship of writing to its authorial subject. It realized "the pure work" of which Mallarmé talks in the following passage: "The pure work implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who gives over the initiative to words" (*Oeuvres complètes*; 366). (The "lisible disappearance" of the reader, of course, was effected by the bound book in Revelation.) Mallarmé's purism here both anticipates and supercedes Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of polyphony in narrative where the author disappears in order to allow the characters an autonomous, non-hierarchical interaction. A final quote from Mallarmé is relevant to the achievement of "Un coup". In his *Autobiography* he confesses to his predeliction for the edificial and totally pre-

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meditated book, "a book which is a book, architectural and premeditated, and not a collection of inspirations dictated by chance" (OC; 663). If nothing else, this underscores the immense distance between Mallarméan "purity" and the biological basis of Charles Olson's Projective Verse.

JD: Could you give a few lines of introduction about Charles Olson, explain "projective verse" and say what its relation to poetry, visuality, and the book is?

S.McC: Published in the early 50s Olson's essay presents an influential theory of the relation of syllable and breath to poetic transmission. Olson's is a bio-poesis in which breath, linked to syllable, conspires to produce a high-energy poem that is projected (literally) over and into a reader. Olson supplements this biological theory with an appeal to the typewriter as a mechanical prosthesis that can accurately notate pauses in breathing as a precision spacing of the written characters. The theory, in alliance with the typewriter, transforms the poem into a score for breath. Olson's great poem "Maximus" is precisely such a document: visually striking, open, non-linear in which space is supercharged as both silence and temporal pause.

JD: Do you ever worry that using references like the Ezekiel reference above leads towards pseudo-mystical blah-blah of a particularly gruesome kind? Not that it's in your work — which I couldn't imagine anyone taking for new age facile mystification. But are there problems in trying to use these references and preserve their real sacred value while also pulling them into a contemporary discussion?

McC: I've always considered the Bible as an irreducibly political and not a sacred text, and one of those cultural texts that shines in its dialogic encounters with profane opponents - like Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Also it's a work riddled with textual contradictions and fascinating editorial problems. There is no originary or ur-Bible, only bibles that exist in national and ideologically motivated translations. (I've tried to explain this to persistent Jehovah's Witnesses who turn up at my door from time to time.) So there is no issue for me of preserving the sacred. The sacred just isn't there as anything other than an ideological construction.

JD: Can you talk in more detail about the transformations of your attitude toward books, "the book" from the 1960s/70s til now?

S.Mc C: In 1969-70 I hand-produced a book-concept that I

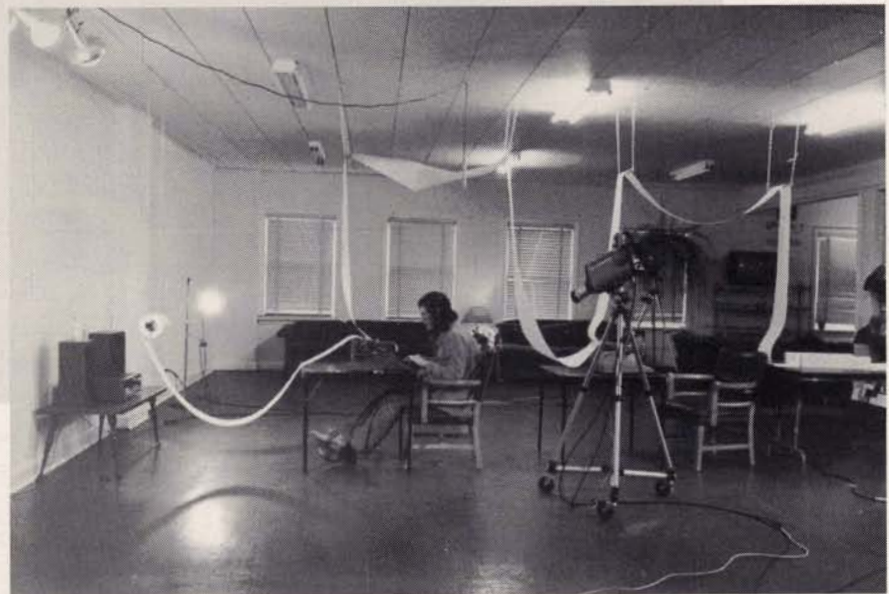
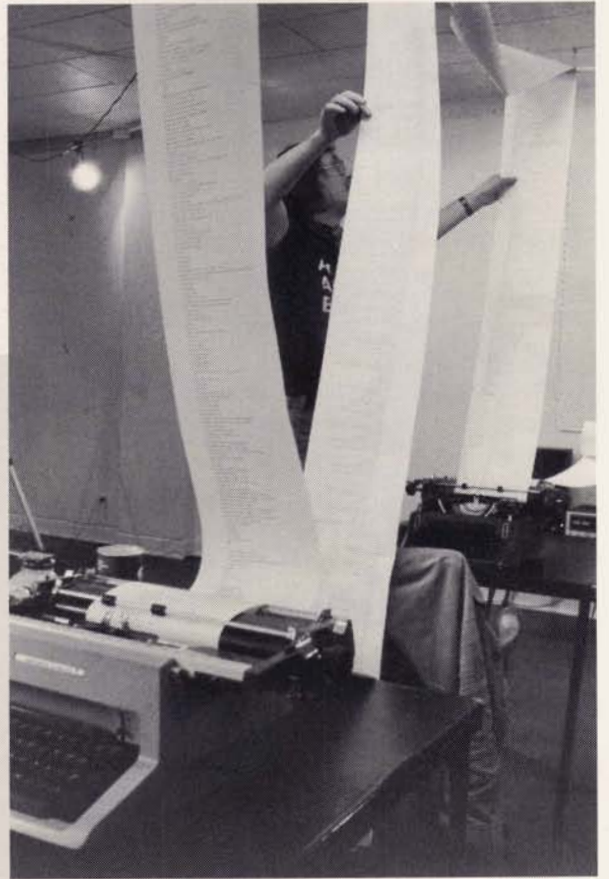
published in a small run called "Groundplans for a Speaking City" which consists in four 8.5" x 11" page copies of fragments of newspaper pages and which are cut up into smaller irregular areas and bound together so as to produce overlaps and interior wrap-arounds. A small strip, for instance, would wrap around a larger surface so as to prevent them being fully negotiated as intelligible pages. The "text" itself was deliberately arbitrary, a found text, if you like, with rubber stamp "graffiti" overlaid on it. This little work was an exploration of page and sequence as the binding powers over spaces and planes, whose political purpose as critique was to problematize the basic presupposition of the book: it's sequential format.

JD: The "ground plans" remind me a bit of Situationist graphics — were you aware of the Situationist International and/or Lettrism and if so when and what did you make of their work?

S.McC: At the time of composition (ca. 1969) I was not familiar with either the Situationists or the Lettristes. I came to the Situationists via Henri Lefebvre's work of everyday life and the Lettristes earlier via their sound poetry.

JD: What other aspects of the book as a concept have served as a point of departure for individual works?

S.McC: I talk above about "Carnival" which tests the assumed parameters of sequence and page (in a manner similar to that of "Groundplans"). The original version that I abandoned was constructed on a long telex roll that extended well over 30 feet. I was thinking retrospectively of Blake's distinction between scroll and book, which in itself was a rethinking of the Old Testament formats in Ezekiel and John which I've already discussed. Another book-concept was a bottled edition of the complete works of Shakespeare in which I was to disbind one volume, small-print collected and shred the separate plays, putting them in small cork-top bottles with an elaborate label. Cooking a cook-book is another book-concept-performance from the mid-70s. In the performance I prepared each chapter as an example of what it listed as menus; the resultant goop was then bottled and labelled. There were bottles of fried pages, dressed and viniggetted pages, roasted pages, etc. "Rip" was another piece from this time that attempted to foreground not the materiality of the book per se but the acoustic properties of that materiality. The book was disbound and the pages ripped in varying rhythmic patterns in front of a microphone. The covers were used for tapping on the mike. "Rip" I see as descending from "Le Livre" whereas with the bottled Shakespeare I



Steve McCaffery, V.O.T.O. (Variations on the Oval), 1977

had in mind a subversion of the absolute stillness of "un coup" by a Duchamp-style mischief. (Duchamp has been a lasting love of mine and I even translated his ready-mades into short performance scenarios as a kind of homage.)

In the late 70s I produced a series of non-books and non-pages which tried to deal with bibliologic issues in performance. "The Pluralities" consisted of me typing a text on a telex roll which passed out of the typewriter carriage and down a fire escape, across some grass and into a lake where the text was supposed to disintegrate. In December 1977 I constructed a performance installation called "Variations on the Oval" [V.O.T.O.]. Through a 12 hour continuous performance I generated a text along a continuous roll of paper. As the writer-performer I was installed between three typewriters. The roll, suspended from the ceiling passed down through the three typewriter carriages, around a system of five pulleys and finally down onto a table. The entire assemblage consisted of a typographic sculpture-in-becoming. The gradual movement of the paper through the machines, moving line by line according to the mechanics of the typing, determined the duration and size of the sculpture. On reaching the table the roll was cut into identical segments thus transforming the sculptural plane into discrete pages. V.O.T.O. then commenced as a blank scroll, passed through a kinetic installation, received a graphic imprint and finally transformed into gathered fascicles of writing. The time taken for the scroll to advance from the initial typewriter to the cutting table was five hours and because of the nature of the pulley system the first section cut did not correspond to the first section typed. As the scroll was segmented the resultant pages were despatched to a local radio station for cable casting back into the gallery. The effect of hearing the first sentences written five hours previously was to produce a sort of mnemonic loop which then entered into dialogue with what I continued to type. On its multiple levels V.O.T.O. constituted a media transformation through scroll, installation, page, radio cable-cast and finally book. In its performative aspect it traced the transformation and interaction of the human subject in the variant functions of writer, active element within an installation, audience and assembler.

The theoretical impetus behind all of this work came from Georges Bataille's notion of general economy which is an economy that entails an unavoidable loss within its operation. (Bataille offers the solar economy as a prime and cosmic example.) It seemed an easy matter to transfer this idea to writing as general economy in which writing leads not to accumulation and retention but to expenditure and loss. In all of this work I tried to investigate the complicity of book, page, writing, machine, performance and translation.

In the 80s I began to concentrate more on the book's relation to discursive power. In **Panopticon** page becomes the site of contestation between competing elements: blocks of simultaneous text and micro assemblages were termed not pages but as "plates". I also worked with colour as a way to represent non-graphic media within writing. For instance, a continuous band of dark grey at the bottom of the page was designated as a strip of film. In **Evoba** I deliberately mix gestural with typographic imprints, in the hope of deneutralizing the page.

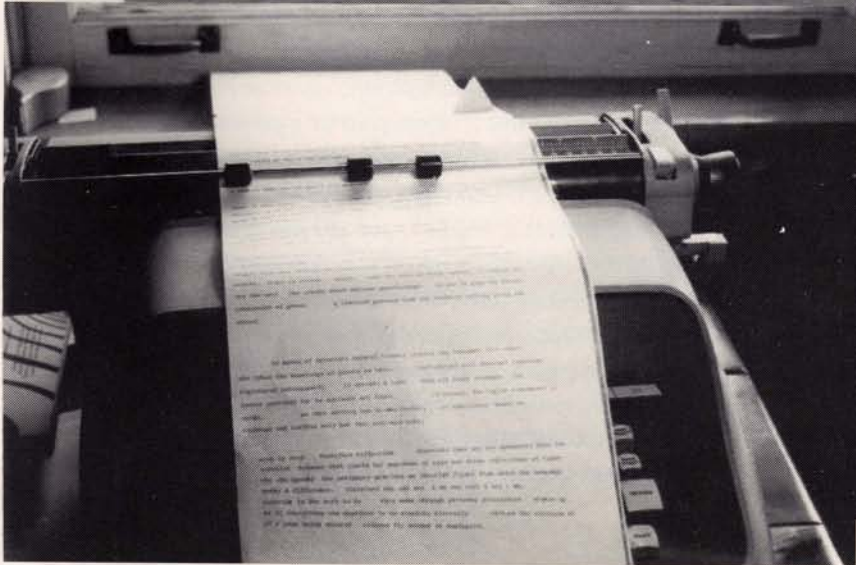
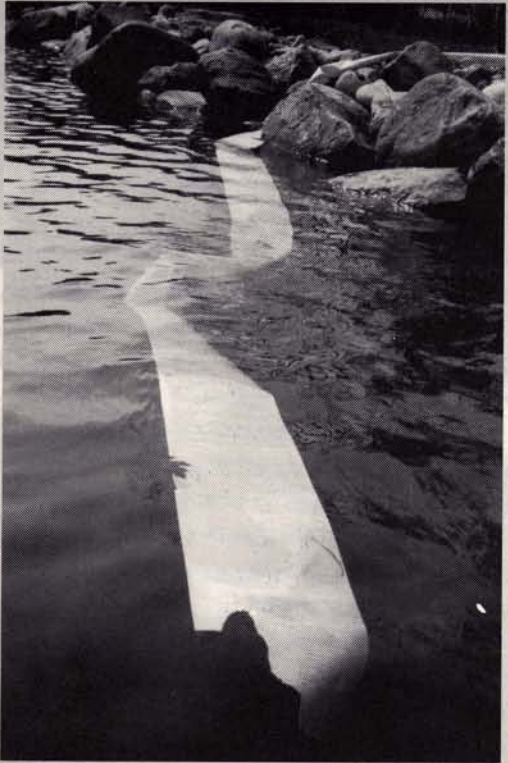
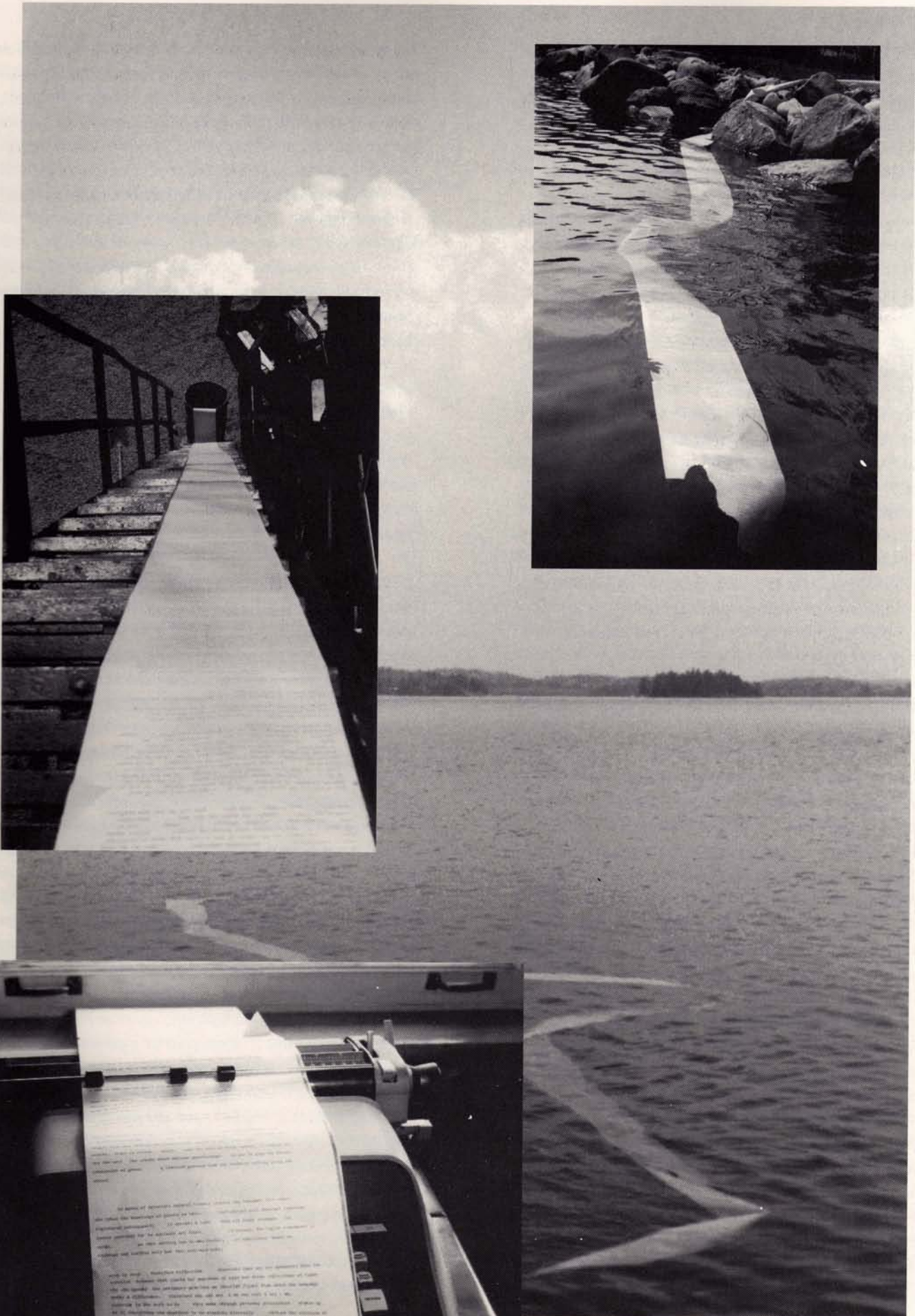
JD: Much of what you talk about in relation to traditions of the Book is closely linked to critical investigations of "a metaphysics of writing" — investigations which have been concerned with the relations among speech, poetics, the voice, the mark as literal, abstract, and theoretical forms. Is there a clear critical engagement with the book as a theoretical instrument which is central to your poetics in any of your work — or as a theme? Or is the book an aspect of a more complex configuration of interlinked concerns about language — logocentrism, reference, meaning, and ludic disruptions of normative behaviors of all kinds?

S.McC: I think my most critical engagement with the book as theoretical instrument is **Panopticon** which transfers Bentham's prison architecture to the architectonics of the book along the lines of the prison-house of language cliché. Certainly, in that work I engage the book's covert quality as devil-trap, or labyrinth, unfold its potential to offer opaque encounters with both text and machine. However, in general, I address the book as an aspect of wider concerns: political, ludic, politico-ludic and philosophical.

JD: Can you talk some more about influences/forces on your consideration of the book as a form/concept?

S.McC: Edmund Jabès's extended obsession with the metaphoricity of the book has been a constant inspiration to me. Among innumerable of his provocative aphorisms let me give the following from **The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion**. "The truly subversive is perhaps the one that denounces both the word subverting the page and the page subverting the word by fusing them in the wake of assailed thought. To make a book would then mean to support the respective takeovers of these subversive forces, which run through language as through silence" (25). And his marvellous take on the book's fundamental counterpull: "... the book never stops venturing outside the book" (28). There's a strong Mallarméan strain detectable in Jabès mixed with a trenchant Jewishness. His





Steve McCaffery, *The Pluralities*, 1977

are ideas that come out of fundamentally Jewish issues: exile, diaspora, which then determine other categories: being, writing, and the book. Also Jabès comes so patently from a culture in which writing and the book (as sovereign, sacred text) are paramount and formative.

Through the ideas of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari I came to conceive the book as a strategic focus for numerous deterritorializations. This of course is to configure the book as a spatial-temporal machine within a spatial cultural assemblage, and to think of the book as a territory opens up subversive tactics of the same order. We can think of poems as deterritorialized books, and books themselves as deterritorialized libraries. So the book as a territorializing force is a useful concept to me. "Carnival" can be seen as just such a gesture - of and against - the book: depagination (derritorialization) and reassembly (reterritorialization) as a different cultural assemblage (typographic panel). Deleuze and Guattari advance the book as an assemblage, a machinic multiplicity. "There is no difference" they assert "between what a book talks about and how it is made. ... A book exists only through the outside and on the outside" (*A Thousand Plateaus*, p.4). In the notion of the book-machine I realized that I had anticipated Deleuzian assemblage before I had become acquainted with it in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

JD: Are there other poets whose work in the "book" as a form was inspirational to you in the early years — not critics, but poets?

S.McC: I've already mentioned Rot. Others would include — in a roughly chronological order — Blake's illuminated books, actually Blake less than the illuminated tradition in general. Looking at something like the Hours of Catherine of Cleves the reader is immediately met with a surplus of optical stimuli that petition inescapably the question, does this signify or not? There is nothing purely decorative in the illuminated marginalia and exergues — all are parts of a multimedia manifold. The pages of these medieval texts present incessant dialogues between the framed text and marginal imagery and arabesques that compete, adumbrate and sometimes ironized the main textual body in their own discursive productions. Bakhtin notes such dialogism in the work of Dostoevsky. There too we experience an oscillation on uncertain ground between the semiotic pull of the marginalia as an image reservoir struggling to become a language, and that of a framed text pushing to be image. Inspiring too in these early books are the pictorial-narrative devices like the banderoles issuing from an angel's or evangelist's mouth to indicate speech as a scroll of breath. All this material escapes Derrida in his genealogy of logocentricism gathered in *Of Grammatology*.

Raymond Queneau's tour de force *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (1961) opened up to me the permutational possibilities not only of language but of the book's component, combinatorial parts. Queneau's book incorporates uniform size pages which are slit horizontally 14 times allowing 14 lines-as-pages to be permuted into an almost infinite number of combinations. In a ludic spirit Queneau demonstrates the power of the book to function as a recombinant machine.

Both bp Nichol and Jack Spicer impressed me as writers who actually compose within the conceptual perlieu of "book". Both had a grasp of the book as a material genre, if you like, and not just the neutral, final gathering-place for a number of disparate poems. Finally, Tom Phillips' *A Humument* is treated-book-art at its most inspirational. Phillips took a Victorian novel, "A Human Document" and through a process of textual eradications and painterly additions and obliterations converts the novel into a new text. There is something complex that resonates in Phillips' achievement: a mining of the book's material sedimentations.

JD: Part of the inspiration to do this interview with you came from watching the video of your work *Paradise Improved* which takes up the theme of "translation", deals with the idea of a book's identity and power, and makes a performance piece out of a transformation from *Paradise Lost* to *Paradise Regained*. The piece is wry in tone — there are two speakers, one using pretentious but interesting theory language, the other interrupting him with commonsensical objections. Their dialogue — or non-dialogue in many cases since the first speaker refuses to really entertain any of the second speaker's points — describes the performance which is being shown in visuals in the film which documents the stages of a seven-day performance. A copy of *Paradise Lost* was taken from its shelf, its pages torn out and scattered in a wooded area — leaves tossed among autumn leaves or skewered onto bare branches. The pages were allowed to fall and settle for four days, and then were gathered back up and the ones recovered were put back into order as *Paradise Regained*. All of this is carried out by a person dressed in a coat inside out wearing a goggle mask, a hat, gloves, and generally appearing like some creature out of a Monty Python medieval drama so that a comical quality is imparted to the high seriousness of the speakers' dialogue. One of the things which I was struck by in this piece was the way in which you used the material form of the book as both the means of making a theoretical point and also as a kind of refutation of some of the absurdities of the high seriousness of the theory voice on the tape. This is a work about books as books which is also about books in

relation to writing, text, authority, and material form. Could you say a few words about this project?

S.McC: The piece arose as an attempt to apply what Dick Higgins and myself jointly called the Principle of Creative Misunderstanding. To believe Joan of Arc was Noah's sister is a plain misunderstanding, but to develop creatively from this misunderstanding and rewrite the Bible from that premise is an entirely different kettle of fish. I simply applied the principle to the title of Milton's first epic which I "creatively misunderstood" as a performative command and not as a title. Milton's great lapsarian theme was thus reapplied in a totally incongruous way (a proper name misunderstood as a verbal command). This principle is closely related to 'pataphysics — Jarry's science of imaginary solutions — and especially the concept of the clinamen which Jarry borrows from ancient Greek atomism. A clinamen, or parenklisis as Epicurus calls it, is the minimal swerve of an atom from a collective laminar flow. It is literally a drift or deviance from a given course which Lucretius — and Epicurus before him — consider the fundamental cause of material change.

In a central way the performance is about literary canonization as well as a text's perpetual capacity to be misread and to deviate. (On the latter preoccupation, of course, the piece hopes to raise the question of what actually comprises a misreading? Is it useful as a blanket term?) As a comment on the canon, **Paradise Improved** is a mischievous attempt to demonstrate a relation between Milton's two epics other than the ones normally ascribed to them. It's a humorous handling, of course, the elimination of "Paradise Regained" as a discrete texts and it's justification and new existence as a destroyed and re-collected copy of "Paradise Lost." But Nietzsche long ago taught me that humour is a powerful weapon of critique and **Paradise Improved** was definitely conceived in the awareness of the creative and destructive force of the laughter repressed or ignored in scholarly discourse. It's certainly not a nihilistic piece, hopefully its achievements are heuristic, a discovery and release of latent implications. The clinamen too is a translative act and **Paradise Improved** certainly tries to test the parameters of translation/transformation. The performative act figured as a translative agency and translation itself envisioned topologically as a distance between two distant points. Finally, it's translative in the sense that I transfer writerly concerns (the book as a bachelor-machine, translation) into the medium of film while still exploring their writerly aspects and implications.

JD: As the dialogue between the two voices begins — I call them the "theory voice" and the "skeptical voice" —

it's immediately apparent that these two speakers are coming from completely different places. As the dialogue starts up the speakers are talking about what a book is. It goes like this:

Theory voice: "— a bachelor machine —"

Skeptic: "Bachelor machine? What's do you mean?"

Theory: "— whose specific purpose has nothing to do with communication at all —"

Skeptic: "Well, where do you plug it in if it's a machine?"

Theory: "— but the annihilation of all writing—"

Skeptic: "—"

Theory: "— we believe that books are nihilistic and sado-erotic in their essence —"

Skeptic: "Well they can't hurt you can they?"

I particularly liked the fact that the two speaking voices don't cancel each other out. They are in a sense both impossible voices — and their counterpoint made me feel that neither of their positions could be taken seriously. I had to locate myself in a place between the two. For instance, when the theory voice makes a remark like, "... the end of the book can only exist within the continuity of the book itself..." and the skeptic comes back with "What is that supposed to mean?" I find myself in partial sympathy with both and in total identification with neither. Was that strategy related to the theme of translation as an inter-mediation? Or am I just sounding like the theory voice?

S.McC: I should start by describing how the film came together. It first began as a black and white still photo-documentation of a piece I then called **Parallax CXX**. The "CXX" refers to Pound's 120th canto which has the lines "I have tried to write Paradise/ Do not move/ Let the wind speak/ That is Paradise." The photo-documentation finally appeared in **Impulse** 1, 2-3, (Spring) 1981 and it's probably best if I just quote extensively from that version to give some idea of its original conception.

"Every word has its potential theatre. Around the word BOOK constellate such words as Beech, Birch and Bark - the rich grouping of wood-words that tie nature to a writing. BOOK derives from the Anglo Saxon BOC: a beech-tree from whence "bocstaef" or beech-staff as a letter or character. It is supposed that the ancient runes were originally scratched upon beech bark as testified by Venantius Fortunatus: "Barbara fraxineis pingatus runa tabellis" - "Let the barbarian rune be marked on beech-wood tablets" - although John Bentley Mays theorizes that the runes were actually a winter script and read from the leafless branches of the trees themselves, somewhat in the active manner of reading the Kabalistic sky texts of Abulafia. So the connexion of wood and word through

their etyms is intimate. The potential theatre of the Book (as Mallarmé desired it) is found in the actual space of the forest. This linking of wood to word with the beech synonymous for all literature connects too with the concept of literary ecology - the notion that literature, before all else, is a complex ecosystem of balances and transgressions. The PARALLAX PERFORMANCE was conceived as a contribution to literary ecology. It is a piece about books, word, reading and delirium with an intended victim in the ecosystem of the Miltonic canon. ... Throughout the performance delirium was taken in its decisively Gallic sense as a praxiological un-reading of Milton's two poems. Hence the violence of the scenario is a double violence: the literal defoliation of one epic with its subsequent scattering and discharge throughout a landscape; and the elimination of the need for the second epic within the Miltonic ecosystem."

The text in **Impulse** concludes with two quotes from Nietzsche and Artaud respectively: "That which is cannot contain motion." "Poetry is that dissociative and anarchic power, which by analogy, associations, images lives entirely on the destruction of known relations." And this final short passage: "If loss concatenates with metamorphosis and banishing, then it too connects with translation. As Jacob Grimm points out the mythic archeverb is ENTRUCKUNG (removal) which is a vanishing, a voluntary translation to another sphere which is always the prerogative of the Gods." As you'll readily agree, this is a suggestive but rather pompous theorizing. However, the initial conceptual thrust was clear: ecological, with a humorous appropriation of the parsimony paradigm commodity logic — (here's a simple way to have two epics for the price of one.)

In rethinking PARALLAX into the film **Paradise Improved** I wanted to relativize the power of the theoretical voice by adding a different, antinomial, anti-intellectual voice (both my own, of course, and hence the deliberate sense of schizophrenic mind at work). I also rethought the theoretical aspect shifting from the model of literary ecology to that of creative misunderstanding - which I've already described above. The film also makes allusions to what are now poststructuralist clichés: Derrida's notion of "dissemination" in the literal scattering of the pages; Barthes' "death of the author" in the small doll pinned to the tree, Barthes' "pleasure of the text" playfully inverted in the description of the book as a sado-erotic bachelor-machine, and Paul de Mann's "blindness and insight" in the use of the mask where the apertures for the eyes are covered over with two round sections cut out from **Paradise Lost**.

Perhaps it would be useful to mention how the film was constructed. The actual written text — spoken by the

theoretic voice — was written after and in response to the image sequence shot on film. I intermixed two copies of the film, so that every image appears twice at different places in the film sequence. The sound-track comprised my "theoretical" voice reading the written text in response to a silent image sequence and leaving gaps in the tape at random intervals and of varying lengths of time. I then added on another channel the ad lib response of the "skeptical" voice, which was totally improvised and constrained by the amount of time left on the tape before the other voice began again. As a consequence there is no proper dialogue as such, just a series of interruptions and overlappings. It was important to me that I played off the prewritten text with improvised and temporally constrained response. It was important too that a viewer experience the fact that genuine communication between the two voices does not take place, that communication is prevented due to constant slippage. Also important was to convey the fact that the two voices speaking were the same voice. There were two important antecedents in my mind-inspirations if you like. One obvious debt is to Beckett's **Waiting for Godot** the other to Flaubert's **Bouvard and Pecuchet**. There's also a tantalizing evocation of my own collaborations in theory with the late bp Nichol under the soubriquet of the Toronto Research Group.

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JD: At the end the theory voice makes a wonderful condensed aphoristic remark, "Translation is the simple distance between two books." Meanwhile, the skeptical voice says, "I still don't understand why a guy wearing a mask and a coat inside out ripping a book and throwing it away in a field is translation — I mean, you know — can you explain that to me?" He never gets his explanation — the theory voice goes right on in unremitting, unresponsive spinning out of puzzling conundrums and teasingly suggestive language. There seemed to suggest a certain jibe pointed at the art-world performance and the discrepancy often posed between what's literally happening and the claims being made for the work — a discrepancy one finds in all kinds of art work between critical discussion and what's in front of you in the room or on the wall or on the page. Was that part of your intention?

S.McC: Absolutely. My main intention, absent from the initial photo-documented piece, was a plea for humour, to see the pomposity and competing wills to power at work in both the art world and in academic discourse in general. In a very real way too **Paradise Improved** is a satire on poststructuralist phraseology and posture, but at the same time a respect for its uses and power.

- end

STEVE McCaffery: ARTISTIC VITA

PUBLICATIONS & BOOKS

- 1996 *The Cheat of Words*, ECW Press, Toronto, 112 pp.
- 1992 *Rational Geomancy: The Kids of the Book-Machine. The Collected Research Reports of the Toronto Research Group 1972-83* (with bp Nichol), Talonbooks, Vancouver, 320 pp.
- 1991 *Theory of Sediment*, Talonbooks, Vancouver, 215 pp.  
*Modern Reading: Poems 1969-1990*, Writers Forum, London, UK, 80 pp.
- 1989 *The Black Debt*, Nightwood Editions, London, Ont. 202 pp.
- 1987 *Evoba: The Investigations Meditations*, Coach House Press, Toronto, 102 pp.
- 1986 *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-86*, Roof Books, New York, 239 pp.
- 1984 *Panopticon*, blewointment press, Vancouver-Toronto, 187 pp.
- 1983 *Knowledge Never Knew*, VÉhicule Press, Montreal, 112 pp.  
*The Prose Tattoo: Collected Performance Scores* (with The Four Horsemen), Membrane Press, Milwaukee, 52 pp.
- 1980 *Legend* (with Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Ray Di Palma, Ron Silliman), Segue Foundation, New York, 243 pp.
- 1978 *The Abstract Ruin: A Draft of Book I*, Coach House Press, Manuscript Editions, Toronto, 23 pp.  
*Intimate Distortions: A Displacement of Sappho*, Porcupine's Quill, Erin, Ont., 97 pp.  
*In England Now That Spring* (with bp Nichol), Aya Press, Toronto, 124 pp.
- 1976 *Horse d'Oeuvres* (with The Four Horsemen), General Publishing, Toronto, 152 pp.
- 1975 *'Ow's Waif*, Coach House Press, Toronto, 152 pp.
- 1974 *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins*, Press PorcÉpic, Victoria, BC, 140 pp.

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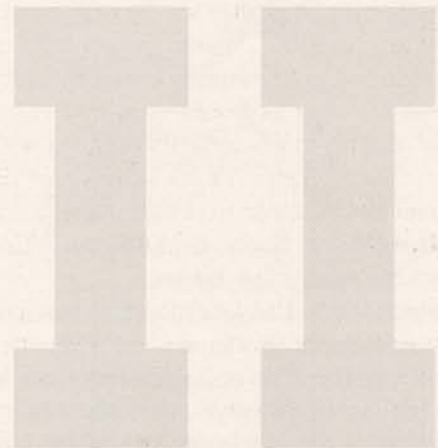
- 1990 *The Entries*, Writers Forum, London, England, 28 pp.
- 1981 *Summary* (three part folding text), Curvd H&Z, Toronto.
- 1980 *The Scenarios*, League of Canadian Poets, 4 pp.
- 1979 *Epithalamium*, Underwhich Editions, Toronto, 4 pp.
- 1978 *Crown's Creek* (with Steven Smith), Anonbeyond Press, Vancouver, 10 pp.  
*Carnival: Panel Two*, Coach House Press, Toronto, 14 pp.
- 1976 *Shifters*, grOnk, Toronto, 20 pp.
- 1975 *Edge* (with Steven Smith), Anonbeyond Press, Toronto, 19 pp.
- 1974 *Broken Mandala*, grOnk, Toronto, 18 pp.
- 1973 *Carnival: Panel One*, Coach House Press, Toronto, 14 pp.
- 1971 *Parallel Texts* (with bp Nichol), Anonbeyond Press, Toronto, 8 pp.  
*Maps: A Different Landscape*, grOnk, Toronto, 6 pp.  
*Collaborations* (with bp Nichol), grOnk, Toronto, 18 pp.
- 1970 *Melons*, grOnk, Toronto, 6 pp.  
*Transitions to the Beast: Post-Semiotic Poetry*, Ganglia Press, Toronto, 24 pp.
- 1969 *Six Concrete Poems*, grOnk, Toronto, 6 pp.  
*Ground Plans for a Speaking City*, interleaved typographic multiple, Anonbeyond Press.
- 1968 *Cap(ture)*, folded, mixed-media multiple, grOnk, Toronto, 1 p.

ANTHOLOGIES: POETRY AND FICTION

- 1996 *Carnival: a Scream in High Park Reader*, Toronto: Insomniac Press.
- 1995 *Cortex: a survey of recent visual poetry* eds. Bob Harrison & Nicholas Frank; Milwaukee: Hermetic Gallery.
- 1995 *The Gertrude Stein Awards in Innovative American Poetry 1993-1994*, ed. Douglas Messerli, Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1995.
- 1994 *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry 1960 - 1990*, ed. Douglas Messerli, Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press.

*The Art of Practice: Forty-Five Contemporary Poets*, eds. Dennis Barone & Peter Ganick, Elmwood: Potes & Poets Press.

- 1993 *La Lengua Radicale*, ed. Esteban Pujals Gesali, Madrid: Gramma.
- 1992 *Verbi Visi Voco: a performance of poetry*, eds. Bob Cobbing & Bill Griffiths. London, England: Writers Forum.
- 1990 *Hard Times: A New Fiction Anthology*, ed. Bev Daurio, Stratford: Mercury Press.
- 1986 *Into the Night Life*, eds. Maureen Cochrane & David Lee, London: Nightwood Editions.
- 1981 *The Maple Laugh Forever: An Anthology of Canadian Comic Poetry*, eds. Douglas Barbour & Stephen Scobie, Edmonton: Hurtig.
- 1978 *The Story So Far 5*, ed. Douglas Barbour, Toronto: Coach House Press.
- 1977 *Whale Sound*, ed. Greg Gatenby, Vancouver: J.J. Douglas.
- 1976 *The Story So Four*, eds. Steve McCaffery & bp Nichol, Toronto: Coach House Press.
- 1975 *Typewriter Art*, ed. Alan Riddell, London: London Magazine Editions.
- 1974 *The Story So Far 3*, ed. David Young, Toronto: Coach House Press.
- 1971 *I Am a Sensation*, eds. Gerry Goldberg & George Wright, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.  
*New Direction in Canadian Poetry*, ed. John Robert Colombo, Toronto: Holt Reinhart & Winston.
- 1970 *The Cosmic Chef*, ed. bp Nichol, Ottawa: Oberon Press.
- 1968 *Student Poetry: A National Anthology*, London: U.L.I.E.S.A.
- \* Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Randell. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, p. 140.



**ANNE MOEGLIN:  
RESPONSE TO JOHANNA DRUCKER  
(continued from JAB4)**

As to your article and in particular with respect to the opposition of Ruscha/Roth, I am convinced that the beginnings determined what followed and that the radical quality of Ruscha's work gives his books a unique quality that is so strong that it is the immediate impetus to and groundwork for the entire genre — which could be played with, modified, and so forth — but which other artists had to take into account and against which they defined themselves. This posterity is evident: the most important artists' books of the 60s and 70s, and also of the 80s and 90s, no matter how opposed they are to their predecessors, remain attached to the look and spirit put into place by Ruscha's books. In my opinion, the rupture introduced by the first book of Ruscha is far more revolutionary than that of Dieter Roth, whose early books (including the one you mention) are closely related to the optical games which were the stock in trade of Swiss constructivist abstract artists of the 1950s among whom the model of the geometric book for children can be traced to the work of Munari. Though I have great admiration for the plastic work in general of Dieter Roth (and I can't say the same for Ruscha, whose books are for me the best aspect of his work), I actually think that the "great" books of Roth are few and far between, especially as so many of his books are simply collections of drawings or texts — that is, books pure and simple: very few among them actually engage with what you term "investigation of the parameters of bookness." It is nevertheless true that those (such as *Daily Mirror Book*, *Snow*, and *246 Little Clouds*) are masterpieces of the genre.

Anyway, I am also not sure if it is necessary to take the concept of "bookness" as a primary criterion for evaluating the success of an artist's book: instead of placing what you call "the book as a neutral format" (as in the case of Ruscha) in opposition to "its conceptual specificity" or "bookness" (as per Roth), I think that the "neutral format" belongs very much to the "conceptual specificity" of the book. I mean that in his own way Ruscha makes use of one of the fundamental characteristics of a book: the material modesty of a series of bound pages which are equivalent *a priori*. If one insists — as I have myself — on the book as a specific form, then it is because one has to (or had to) distinguish the artist's book from the ordinary

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book as a work of art, in order to defend its right to an artistic existence. In the 70s and 80s, Ulises Carrión and Clive Phillpot, in their role as pioneers of criticism in this realm, had good reason to do so. But although I think that this has frequently helped to point out what exactly a book is in concrete terms, and the ways an artist can make something artistic of a book in the same way others do with canvas and pigments, this tendency has laid such an emphasis on the formal aspects of the book that it has led to a confusion between the "book as a form" with "the form of the book" — which is to say, has reduced book form (in an artistic sense, that is, form built or created from material in so far as it is given the function of communicating *signification*) to the mere material structure of the book as a set of pages bound in a fixed sequence. Form, in an artistic sense, shouldn't be confused with format: in my opinion, form is the manner in which a format (a definite support) is worked in order to express a specific sense. Form is thus not a given, pre-established and intangible, but a result, and is different each time depending on the work.

Without this distinction, one is obliged to condemn or criticize, as indifferent to "bookness" not only Ruscha (as you have) but also the bulk of publications by Fluxus artists who were above all intent on putting ideas out into the world, and also the work of conceptual artists, as well as the great number of books which have been created in the service of artistic practices involved with the revelation of a collection, inventory, or archive (Christian Boltanski, Richard Long, Hans-Peter Feldmann, David Tremlett, Claude Closky, for example) according to the whole tradition of the book which is used as a receptacle of memory. I mean that the *non-utilisation* of certain properties of the book, especially the idea of sequential order and the temporality which it induces, can carry an artistic significance: this is the case with Ruscha (the refusal of all logical or narrative progression, the rejection of any hierarchy among the images) as it is with Boltanski (the list or inventory negating, by definition, any progress from page to page: the order among the images is often without any importance since it's the accumulation which matters). It's the content of the book — the artistic project which it expresses — which must determine the manner in which the material apparatus of the book should be exploited, not the contrary.

I think that the book is, both historically and also by its very nature, a medium conceived to grant priority to the message. This is one of the

main reasons for its appearance [in the artworld, tr.] in the 1960s: the rejection of artistic formalism, at that time dominant in creative and critical practice, in favor of an art whose aim was to signify (in order to modify habits of thought) or to intervene in the world and real life (in order to change it). In short, the book, by its very nature, seems to me to be the (visible) idealist medium par excellence! The material support doesn't have to be taken into account except in so far as it contributes to the content. Too much attention to the "bookness" of the book results in a work which gets carried away by virtuosity (for this reason, the early work of Telfer Stokes often seems to me like games or exercises, as I stated in an article in *Azimuts*) or by sheer materiality, which is to say, the physical aspect of the book taken as an end in itself, worked as a book object (see the evolution of Kevin Osborn's books). I feel that first and foremost, though I wouldn't want to say exclusively, the book is a vehicle for thought, even an artist's book!

Originals of the texts cited in Anne Moeglin's article JAB4. (Translator's note: Owing to deadlines, we printed Anne Moeglin's article with citations which had been translated by her from English into French and back into English again, not the best situation. We apologize to Anne Moeglin for having massacred certain quotes, to our readers for having had to read them in their mutated form. Thanks to Anne Moeglin for providing these new notes.)

— Edward Ruscha to John Coplans, "Concerning *Various Small Fires*. Edward Ruscha Discusses His Perplexing Publications," *Artforum*, vol.3., no.5, February 1965, p.25:

"I am not in sympathy with the whole area of hand-printed publications, however sincere. [...] I am not trying to create a precious limited edition book, but a mass-produced product of high order."

— Edward Ruscha, cited by Bourdon David, "Ruscha as Publisher (or All Booked Up), in *Artnews*, vol.71, no.2, April 1972, p.32:

"When I start on one of these books, I get to be the impresario of the thing, I get to be majordomo, I get to be the creator and total proprietor of the whole works, and I like that."

— Sol LeWitt in "Statements on Artists' Books by Fifty Artists and Art Professionals Connected With the Medium," in *Art Rite*, no.14, 1977, p.10:

"Books are the best medium for many artists working today."

— John Baldessari, "Information Paintings Never Completed," in "Konzeption- Conception", exhibition catalogue by Rolf Wedewer and Konrad Fischer, Leverkusen: Städtisches Museum, 1969, unpaginated:

"No one ever looks at art. Do works directly for reproductions in magazines. Since we know works by reproductions we should only do work for reproduction. No more middly-man art."

— John Baldessari, "Statements on Artists' Books by Fifty Artists [...]" loc.cit., p.6:

"Art seems pure for a moment and disconnected from money. And since a lot of people can own the book, nobody owns it."

— "un langage pour le sens," pour parler comme Gilbert et George

— Exposition organized by Zona Archives (Muarizio Nannucci) in Florence in 1988: "Art in Bookform / Book in Artform":

"Practices of avant-garde: art steps out of the gallery and changes skin. It takes off the precious outfit of an objet d'art and dresses in a more practical way according to its purpose and nature. [...] Samples without value in a world where everything is measured in values."

— Gary Richman, Introduction, in "Offset: A Survey of Artists' Books", exhibition catalogue, Cambridge (USA): New England Foundation for the Arts, 1984, unpaginated:

"A genuinely 'poor' art of the book."

"What is truly 'rare' about an offset artist's book is the availability of its author's unique vision rather than its scarcity as an object."

— Peter Frank and Judith Hoffberg, "Multiple World. An International Survey of Artists' Books", exhibition catalogue, Atlanta: Atlanta College of Art Gallery, 1994:

"The fervor of experimentation and discovery and the glow of artistic and social camaraderie among book artists may not be as powerful as it has been in the 1970s" [...] "It is supplemented with the excitement new technologies provide, stimulating the creation of new forms, styles, and concepts [...]"

"Today's librarian is tomorrow's curator. Today's dust jacket is tomorrow's frame. Today's bookshop is tomorrow's gallery."

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## THE ART OF POLITICAL EPHEMERA

Johanna Drucker

Two recent exhibitions of materials produced to be ephemera — posters, handouts, magazines — provided vivid historical evidence of the active engagement of artists with the public sphere at two very different moments in history: "Building the Collective: Soviet Graphic Design 1917-1937" (Columbia University's Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery) and "Counterculture: Alternative Information from the Underground Press to the Internet" (Exit Art/The First World), both in New York City.

As an instrument for providing artists widespread visibility, printing technology has been an essential component of avant-garde aspirations towards influencing policy and/or building alternative positions in the 20th century. These two exhibitions demonstrate the ways technical changes affected the production of political ephemera as printing became increasingly available through the proliferation of such modes as offset, xerox (electrostatic), and desktop printers. The restrained access of early 20th century centralized production has given way to widely distributed means for printing multiples and putting them into the public spaces as leaflets, posters, and independently produced journals. The thematic differences between the two exhibitions mark the distance between early 20th century avant-garde engagements with institutionalized politics and the strategic interventionary strategies of the later decades. Meanwhile, stylistic distinctions have their own implications: the graphic languages of modernism so enthusiastically embraced in the early 20th century had become so identified with corporations by mid-century that the look of "alternative information" from the 1960s onward is distinguished from mainstream print media by an embrace of grunge, in your face, low-tech aesthetics.

"Building the Collective," curated by Leah Dickerman, chronicles twenty years and four major periods in which posters and other ephemera played a significant role in Soviet politics and public policy. Beginning with the period of the Civil War 1918-21 the exhibition is organized according to the economic programs which shaped the first two decades of the Soviet restructuring of the old feudal empire: New Economic Policy (NEP)(1921-27), the First Five Year Plan (1928-32), and the Second Five Year Plan (1933-37). The fact that many of the works in this exhibition were designed by artists known by name from their identification with and participation in the Russian and Soviet avant-garde is one of the many paradoxes of this history. All of this printed ephemera was part of the vast programs for Soviet industrialization, education (on topics such as

hygiene, nutrition, and literacy), and modernization — fundamental aspects of the transformation of Soviet culture from a feudal condition to that of a productive modern state. Documents of the crucial need to create a public sphere through mass communication, in large part with an audience in which literacy was low if non-existent, the posters record changes of attitude toward the individual worker and the collective identity as it was being articulated by the state. Only peripherally is the exhibition concerned in any way with older notions of avant-garde art or alternative artistic and community activity. The well-known representatives of the avant-garde movements of the 1910s and early 1920s are actively engaged in the project with the belief that they are helping to build a utopian society. Commitment to that vision motivated every aspect of this work.

Both technological and iconographic considerations provide insight into the constraints on material and conceptual means which were available through the 1920s and 1930s. Recognizing, for instance, that their audience consisted of a populace largely unaccustomed to the concept of mass communication and almost entirely unfamiliar with printed media, the artist/designers sought compromises between their own enthusiasms for innovative modern forms and a pragmatic desire to communicate effectively. Thus a shrewdness about combining vernacular forms (largely derived from the picture book styles of *lubok* wood-cut designs which circulated widely in Russian peasant culture) and newer modern modes marked the transition years of the late 1910s and early 20s. In many cases materials which might have been produced photographically, or through the means of newer technological means for typesetting, color separations, and other production processes in the West, are laboriously hand manipulated. Images in some of Rodchenko's designed works have been redrawn for printing, for example, rather than enlarged photographically and rendered in a photographic image, thus reflecting gaps in the available production means. This reflects tellingly on the gap between the Soviets' aspirations for social change and their capacity to muster the necessary resources to achieve it. Though avant-garde artists in the 1910s had produced printed works such as books and posters using mimeograph and linoleum block printing, the availability of poster-sized presses, high speed machines capable of color registration and long runs, was largely concentrated in centralized locations. Thus these materials were almost all produced under the aegis of state agencies such as the State Publishing House (Gosizdat) in Petrograd and the political education department of the Commissariat of Enlightenment, though some of the earlier works were produced by various partisan factors within the civil strife,



such as the Revolutionary-Military Council of the Republic (Revvoensovet). One particularly ingenious attempt to overcome the limitations of centralized production is evident in the posters designed by the Glavpolitprosvet, the political education department of the Commissariat of the Enlightenment, which distributed stencils for production of posters in a widely dispersed number of geographical locations. Locally "printed" using the stencils and ink or paint applied through them by brush, these ROŠTA posters (as they are known) are simplified in form, crudely designed to communicate basic information about the conditions of food production, political affairs, and to promote a spirit of collective effort.

The gradual consolidation of state and collective power can be traced in the changing iconography of the posters. The earnest inventiveness of a Gustav Klutsis photomontage of 1920 advertising the promise of "Electrification of the entire country," in which Lenin strides confidently into a central image of modern architecture, has a distinctly different feel to it than the totalizing images of the 1930s in which any mark of artistic individualism has vanished, along with any place for critical discussion or deviance from the overwhelming forces of Soviet power. As scholar Maria Goff pointed out in her comments at the March 22 Symposium held in conjunction with the exhibition, it is difficult to look at the posters of the 1930s and **not** see them as images of violence, the stridently red ink of Soviet iconography too close to blood for the association to be ignored, at least with historical hindsight. Early optimism, however, was not merely earnest, but inspired. The work of Klutsis, Rodchenko, and Vladimir Mayakovsky, as well as the lesser known Dmitrii Moor, Viktor Deni, and Valentina Kulagina, each of whose work has distinctive and individual stylistic elements, was not coercively produced at the service of the emerging institutions of Soviet Russia. These artists actively engaged in the debates about the forms such institutions should have to best serve the interests of the collective whole and in the exploration of the role of visual forms — new, innovative graphic means — in the process of social transformation. There is an obvious paradox between the historical recovery of authorial identity of the works within this exhibition and the contemporary collapse of individual goals into collective enterprise. But in their original production and distribution these ephemeral works did not function through displaying that identity. No marks identify these as works of individual authors, artists or designers, and the promotion of collective goals through the instrument of artistic individualism would have been both counterproductive and conceptually repellent to the individuals involved.

The Russian/Soviet avant-garde has become the para-

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digmatic instance of integration of avant-garde agendas with actual social transformation at a national scale. But in critical circles this identity has suffered the vicissitudes of fashion and scholarly opportunity. With a few notable exceptions, many of these artists fell into relative obscurity (by contrast with their Western counterparts in Futurist, Dada, DeStijl or other movements) in the late years of Stalinism and Cold-War relations when access to archives was virtually impossible. Rodchenko and Mayakovsky have heroic status within the mythos of the avant-garde, as the articulators and practitioners of an engaged artistic praxis. The success and martyrdom of these Soviet artists reads much more dramatically against the events of history than does the gradual ebbing away of Western avant-garde as it was upstaged by and then absorbed into and/or eclipsed by media culture. The Soviet avant-garde both was and comes to symbolize the possibility for art to function as a force — not merely a rhetoric — for cultural resistance and/or transformation. The validity of the historical assessment notwithstanding, such cult worship has, perversely, largely served to **depoliticize** the study of the avant-garde. Soviet concepts are all too often the object of jargoned critical study in work by academics who are phobically afraid of engagement with contemporary political issues. And while celebrating every scrap of ephemeral Rodchenko or Mayakovsky material for its political engagement, current critics often reject the living legacy of these artists (both alternative art such as that represented in the Exit Art show and art produced within the commercial, political, or mass media arenas) as insufficiently "high" art to be worthy of study. Current battles in art history departments about the legitimacy of "visual culture" often divide the territory of acceptable and unacceptable objects of study along lines which would have eliminated most of what now passes as canonical avant-garde production had it been contemporary. The terms on which this is done are usually those old shibboleths of "quality." The visual distinction between the high art conception/design values of the Soviet exhibition and the popularly conceived grunge-to-vernacular design values of the Exit Art show would divide along exactly these lines. Experimental design with a graphic base derived from modern innovations carries an art pedigree which the vernacular language of the underground press, from the 1960s onward foreswore with a vengeance.

"Alternative Information from the Underground Press to the Internet" has in common with "Building the Collective" that both are drawn from materials produced to be ephemeral and to circulate anywhere except within the domains of fine art. Curated by critic Brian Wallis, with the assistance of Exit Art curator Melissa Rachleff,

the exhibition exhaustively and intelligently reveals the poignant and passionate history of alternative publishing over approximately the last three and a half decades. Anger and stridency, rather than good design or visual elegance and skill, characterize the visual and verbal tone of these publications. They were inexpensively produced, in most cases through the cheapest available means. And stylistically they are a long way from that once radical "modern" graphic vocabulary - which a half century or so after its innovation in a radical context had come to be the good task, Swiss style norm of design in the culture of corporate capitalism. To be visibly distinct from such clearly mainstream forms alternative publishing has adopted grunge, fast-and-dirty, cut now and paste later styles of production. While available means may have proliferated and multiplied in the decades between the beginnings of the Soviet Union and the Civil Rights struggles in the United States, the higher end seamless apparatus of commercial media were all conspicuously eschewed by the alternative press. Seeking a self-identified community, these publications found their audience through a counter-culture look which had the same relation to fine design as its grooming and dress codes had to the grey-flannel suited Babbitry of corporate culture.

The contrasts between these two exhibitions are significant, but so are some of the similarities. In both cases a mass of ephemeral material produced at the service of political agendas provides a graphic map of the interactions of cultural policies and a public sphere in which printed media serve a crucial role. But where the Soviet materials were centrally produced using the best available means of printing equipment — photolithography on offset presses, relief printing, gravure, and so forth (with the above-mentioned exception of the ROSTA posters) the materials of the Alternative Information exhibition were produced all over the United States — mainly but not exclusively in urban areas — but by means available in any local mall or small office. The fact that xerox, quick-print, mimeo and rexograph were added to the limited modes of silkscreen and stencil as inexpensive and readily available modes of production allowed this shift to take place. The availability of print technology proliferated in the post 1950s (in first world culture especially) - as is evident everywhere in this exhibition. The fact that the avant-garde had an integral place within the formulation of the Soviet state, and that graphic skills as well as poetic and artistic ones, were able to be conceived of as aspects of state programs is of course utterly at odds with the counter-culture use of print as a force for articulating alternative policies of resistance, subversion, revolution, and even armed struggle. These are pamphlets by and for Black Panthers, Yuppies, Feminists, Gay activists and other

groups — many of whom had a tangential — or even adversarial — relation to the artworld. All had a tendentious attitude towards official, mainstream, and state policies to the extent that it was impossible for individual members of these groups to imagine that such an institutionalized place, if it ever existed, could serve their interests without seriously compromising the integrity and conviction of their ideals. If it's hard to separate the Soviet designers' promotion of state policies from the evaluation of these policies from their eventual absorption into Stalinist communism, it's also difficult to discount the considerable impact of the later counterculture on American politics. It could be argued that many of the changes advocated from within what appeared, at first, to be marginal positions came to be reflected in official policy in the 1960s. Aspects of Johnson's Great Society, the Entitlement programs, affirmative action for minorities and women, changes in education and general cultural awareness of issues of racism, gender discrimination, AIDS policies, and other major points of cultural change germinated within the very networks whose publications appear in the Alternative Information exhibition.

Both of these exhibitions were staged in art institutions and make evident a fundamental paradox of art historical recuperation: to destroy the radicality of the political past it may be enough to exhibit it. Preservation is its own form of death sentence, and the risk of mounting visual objects in such a display is that they risk appearing as autonomous instances of design and production, rather than as the contingent, contentious works they were within their original context. The archival riches of both exhibitions bely the simple reduction of pointed ephemera to pointless trivia, attempting to avoid a totally deadening activist-to-fetishist transition. Still, one might legitimately ask whether the Wallach Gallery, which functions as part of Columbia's Department of Art History and Archaeology, would have allowed this exhibition if it had not been conceived of within the terms of canonical legitimation provided by the presence of works by Rodchenko, Kluttsis, Altman, Mayakovsky and others with impeccable artistic credentials. As in the case of the exhibition of John Heartfield's photomontage's of AIZ, exhibited at MoMA in 1993, there is a bitter irony in the fact that work meant to function in the public sphere and through mass reproduction now has its identity preserved largely through complicity with the sanitizing display techniques of these privileged venues and through according auratic status to the original maquettes and drawings. Museums and art galleries are active sites of course, not dead space in the realm of culture. But the entombment of activist art within the white walled politeness of such environs can certainly defuse its historical punch, letting it slip towards an

aesthetic recuperation of stylistic tropes rather than towards the critical impact of its polemical rhetoric. Though this happens to some extent within each venue, the Alternative Culture show, by its overwhelming repleteness of material contextualizes the works through this process of exhaustive display. The sheer volume of material may overwhelm the viewer and succeeds in using so much printed matter that nothing can be seen in isolation as a "special" object. The Soviet show relies on the more conventional tactic of wall labels to perform the task of providing necessary context, and the design connoisseur could certainly ignore the pointed emphases of these texts in favor of a superficial engagement with the formal graphic vocabulary.

If connoisseurship is one of the hazards of exhibition display of artifacts whose original power resided in their contextual effect, then a greater risk would seem to be to let these materials fall entirely into obscurity. Their critical impact still reads, and the sense in which the concept of "making-strange," which was so important a strategy within the Russian and Soviet avant-garde, can still function, even at nearly a century's remove, is a compelling argument for letting this work be preserved — just as the opposite sense of rendering familiar the recently past history of alternative visions serves to remind us all too poignantly how quickly gains can become losses and strident convictions be suppressed. If there is an air of curious nostalgia in the Alternative Information exhibition, especially in the first room where the earliest publications are exhibited, it is part of the general sense of the disappearance of those values which so actively pervaded public consciousness when the counter-culture was a visible and viable site, before it was squeezed out by cultural downsizing, forces of repression and economic constriction. The Internet's proposed status as site of salvation — alternative or mainstream — has yet to be tested against the processes of history. As an extended public sphere the Internet is no different than the walls of the city, its web sites no different from the news kiosks designed for the distribution of Soviet publications in the 1920s or the stacks of newsprint papers available at the laudromat, health food store, and Free Clinics where alternative press materials were distributed in later decades. But communicative interaction still has to be transformed into instrumental action if the networks formed through such electronic connections are to be anything more than a virtual dream of community.

- end

Dear JAB,

...And that brings me to JAB - the forum for shamelessly asking questions and unapologetically purporting answers. Hurray! Much of the contents, so far, seem to revolve around discussing Who Belongs in Our Club. To quote Johanna, "artists' books can't come into their own unless there is a concerted effort to do more in the way of exhibitions and critical writing, and attempts to show the whole field in its rich history, diversity and current complexity." You chastize Trissel for "putting blinders on to the full range of activity produced as artists' books" yet conclude the very same paragraph by announcing that artists' books, art books, fine print books and book books should go their separate ways. Therein lies the confusion. Although articulating the differences can aid in our understanding, communicating, critiquing the field, drawing lines is necessarily problematic because there are so many grey areas. How can we discuss the whole field in all its complexity while at the same time dissecting the work into genres in order not to have to be bothered by the ones that simply don't interest us?

The tediousness of this Who Belongs in Our Club argument is the ever-present need to dismiss everything that stands on THAT side of the arbitrarily drawn line; the very defensive stance that what WE make is superior to what Y'ALL do is endlessly postured. This, from every camp. And then the stew is continually peppered with each camp insisting that their work is on the cutting edge with its obsession over breaking free of some burden which hideously shackles the Book - be it literary text, sequential narrative, craft, physicality... Looks like every book arts journal I've ever seen excludes huge portions of book making activity as outside its field of interest. Even JAB. Silly me, I still think it would be awfully swell to examine the whole field's rich history, diversity and current complexity.

Part of the competitiveness between these camps is economic. Because so many of us rely on institutions to purchase our books, the reality is, if they spend a lot of money on buying your book, there won't be any money left to buy my book. Therefore, perhaps we can shame them into realizing that it's foolish to buy your type of book because my type of book is what the field is *really* about anyway.

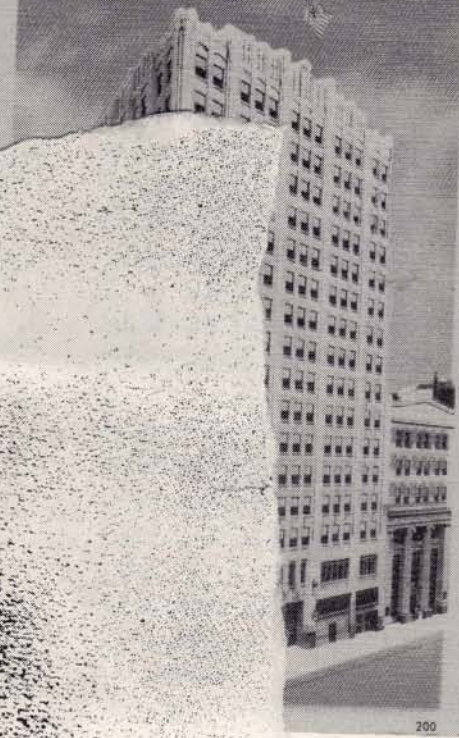
Finally, although I'm a devoted JAB fan, I have to say there is a certain dreariness in JAB articles due to the gleeful, self-congratulatory ridiculing of other's opinions with smart-ass sarcasm. The review of the midwest book show [JAB5] is the most glowing example to date. The point is: there are a lot of intriguing points raised both in the articles and the letters. And the tell-it-like-it-is, no-nonsense, up-frontness is MOST refreshing. But having to wade through the quagmire of off-the-cuff insulting humor at the expense of the subject is a waste of time. I come away from these articles NOT inspired or provoked to thoughtfulness but rather *weary*. Who cares. Sophomoric, churlish jabs don't deserve your purpose. Even if the subject "deserves" it.

Having said that, I thank you whole heartedly for the candor and the riled, plucky spirit of the zine.

- Jules Remedios Faye



PROFESSIONAL BUILDING, 11TH GRAND, KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI



Correspondence  
The Valentin & Son Publishing Co., Ltd., Montreal and Toronto  
Printed in Great Britain  
Will @  
som  
Mush

Sherman, set the way-back machine for 1864, Atlanta, Georgia. Sure thing Mr. Peabody. I bet I can guess who we're gonna find there.



18



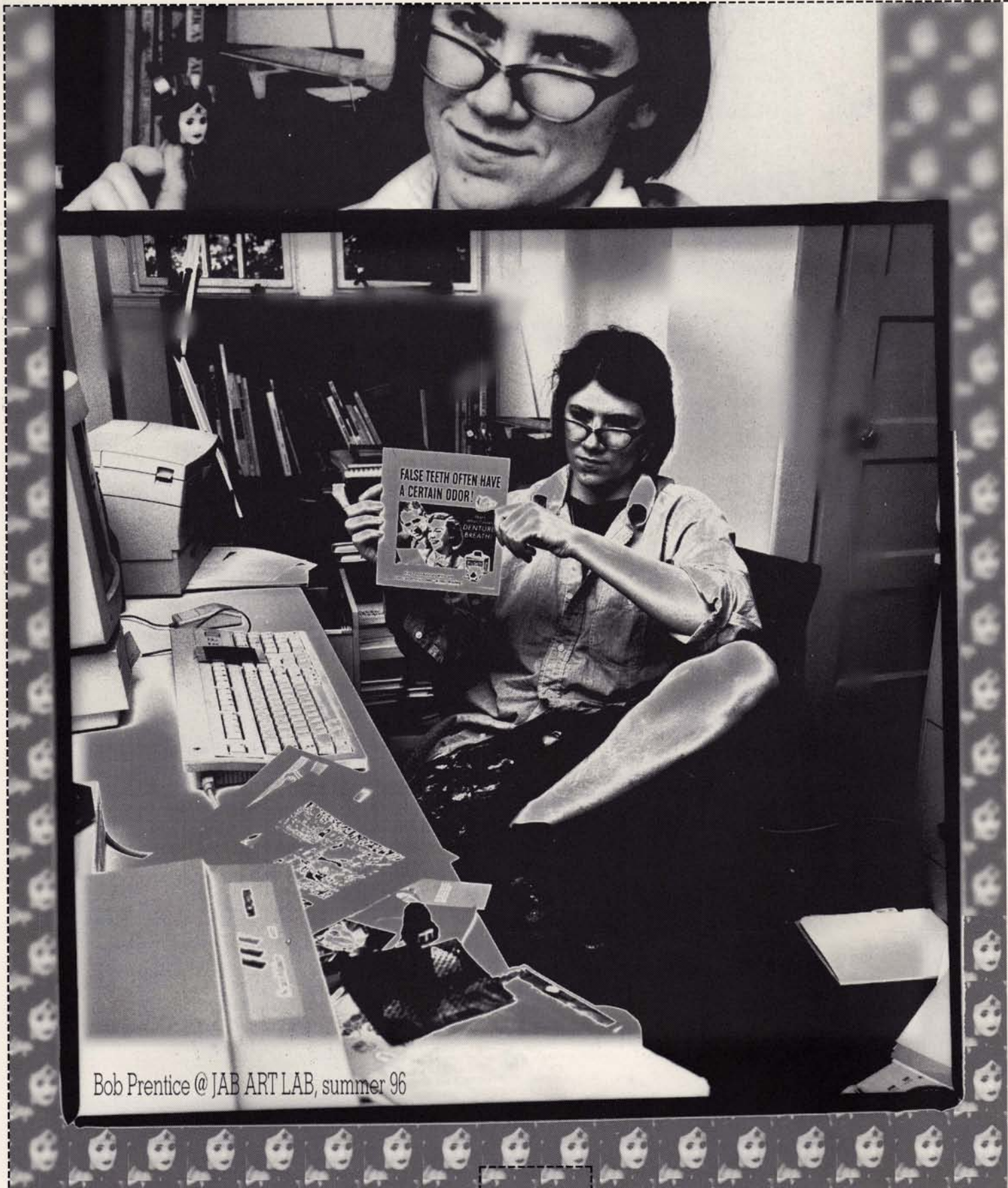
not dead yet

dear journal of artist book,

i think that your work  
is **complitly** absurd and  
**'inframinge'** like they say in  
france. it's **maybe** better  
for you to stop the  
**production** and **beginning**  
to **learn cooking!!!!**  
**with love!!!!**

houghton library.  
**conspirator** of the **system**.

[ ]



Bob Prentice @ JAB ART LAB, summer 96

[ ]

[ ]

WINDOWS  
as thick as  
WALLS  
LINE A SECTION  
OF THE SKY

AND CROSSED  
recrossed  
BY  
CABLE,  
TRACK,  
AND  
WIRE.

HERE  
THE  
elevated  
rail

CARRIES its rush  
hour  
pitch

PAST  
belt-guard  
fire-escape.

NOW

telephone,  
trolley,  
and power

LINES

FOR  
OUTNUMBER  
weights.

SUCH  
a profusion  
of  
STRUCTURAL  
DETAIL

SUCH  
marvelous  
UTILITY

Passengers  
and  
signals  
CIRCULATE

FAULT  
LESS  
LY

alongSIDE  
UNSETTLED  
CURTAINS  
BRUSHING  
THEIR  
SKILLS

BENEATH  
THIS  
INTERMITTENT  
BLANKET

IRONCLAD  
AND  
PROTECTIVE

there is  
a haziness  
involving

the shadows  
of  
every  
cable

CAST ONE WIRE  
IN  
A  
TIME  
BUT RESOLVABLE

INTO BLACK  
STREAKS,  
graphite rifts  
in  
the  
light.

THE AIR  
OUTSIDE  
ROOM,

THE  
CEILING  
is  
a  
SWITCHBOARD  
SKY

FULL  
BUT  
NEVER  
STILL.

Emily McVarish, *Wards of Obsolescence*, 1995, San Francisco

Emily McVarish, *Wards of Obsolescence*, 1995, San Francisco, 20 pages, letterpress.

The "wards" of "obsolescence" in the title of this work refer to the galleys of standing type left from other projects which McVarish set for a host of book/object/sculpture works exhibited at 871 Fine Arts in San Francisco last year. Recycling those chunks of text into a single letterpress book, McVarish made a truly engaging work, not just incidental proofs of cast-offs. The pages are composed of interacting fragments in steel blue, warm black, dark sepia, greys and greens with an occasional accent passage printed in brighter brick red or mustard. But it's not just the formal imagination which makes this such a winning work, or the fact that the respect for book structure, attention to margins, gutter, spreads and turnings are dynamically impressed into the integrated total of the pages and the work, and not just the imaginative play with the technically restricted vocabulary of letterpress -- it's also the

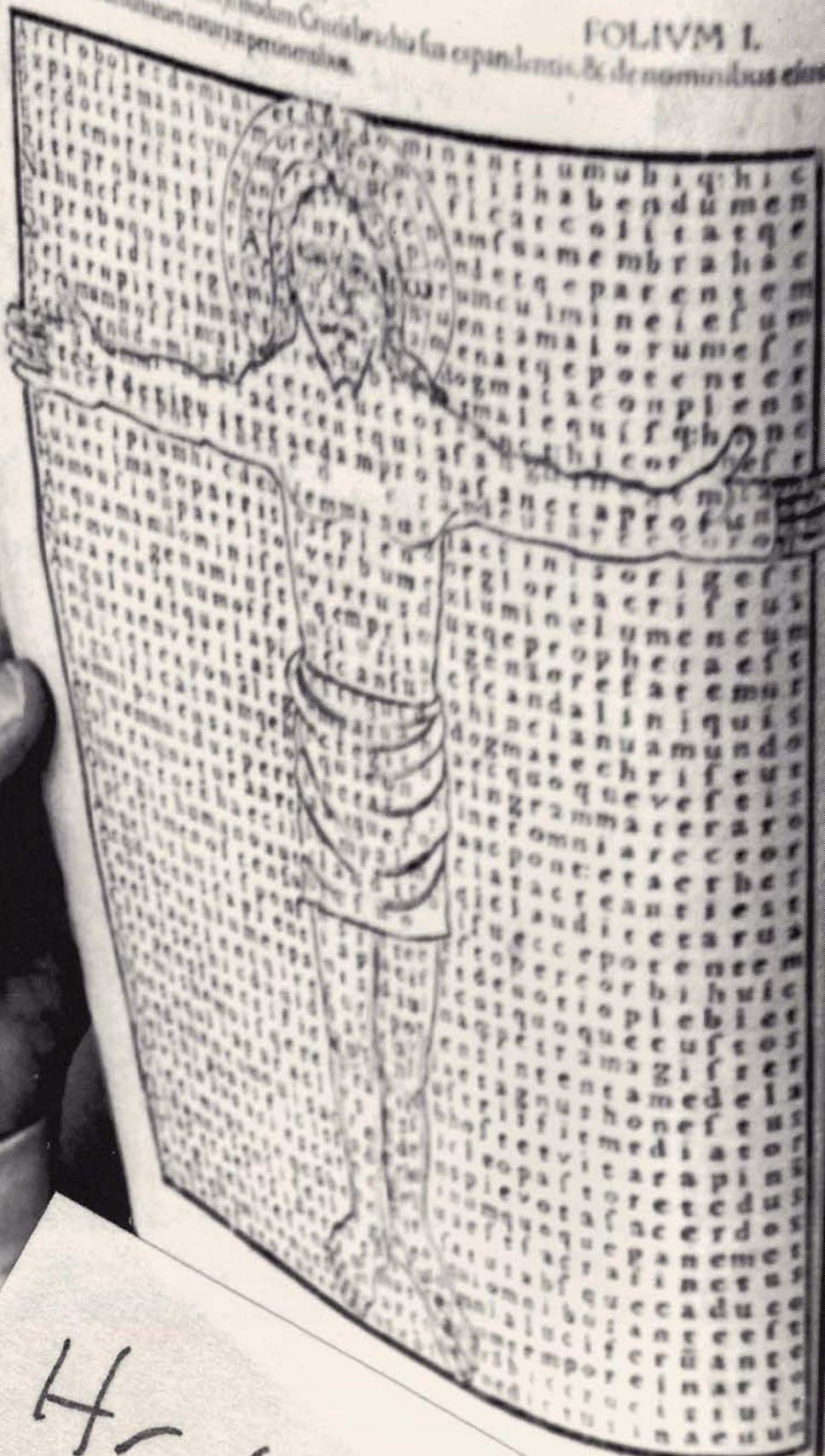
language itself. Content is elusive, suggestive, richly figured. As the blocks of type themselves are formed figures in the white expanse of paper, so the fragments of prose/poetry compose imagistic scraps of meaning: "thin arms and stairways and conical light [...]" An alternative to linearity is presented in the field-like distribution of elements, disposed according to the grids which provide the essential structural foundations of letterpress as a medium. The pages are porous, spacious, the eye invited to move through any number of possible pathways through the modular units of verbal material. Skillful, deft, exquisite, stopping short of deadly preciousness, this is a well-achieved work of hypertext in print media -- with all its attendant visual and tactile pleasures.

-- JD

Primigena. De imagine Christi in modum Crucis brachia sua expandentis. & de nominibus eius  
ad diuinam seu ad humanam naturam pertinentibus.

LIBER PRIMVS.

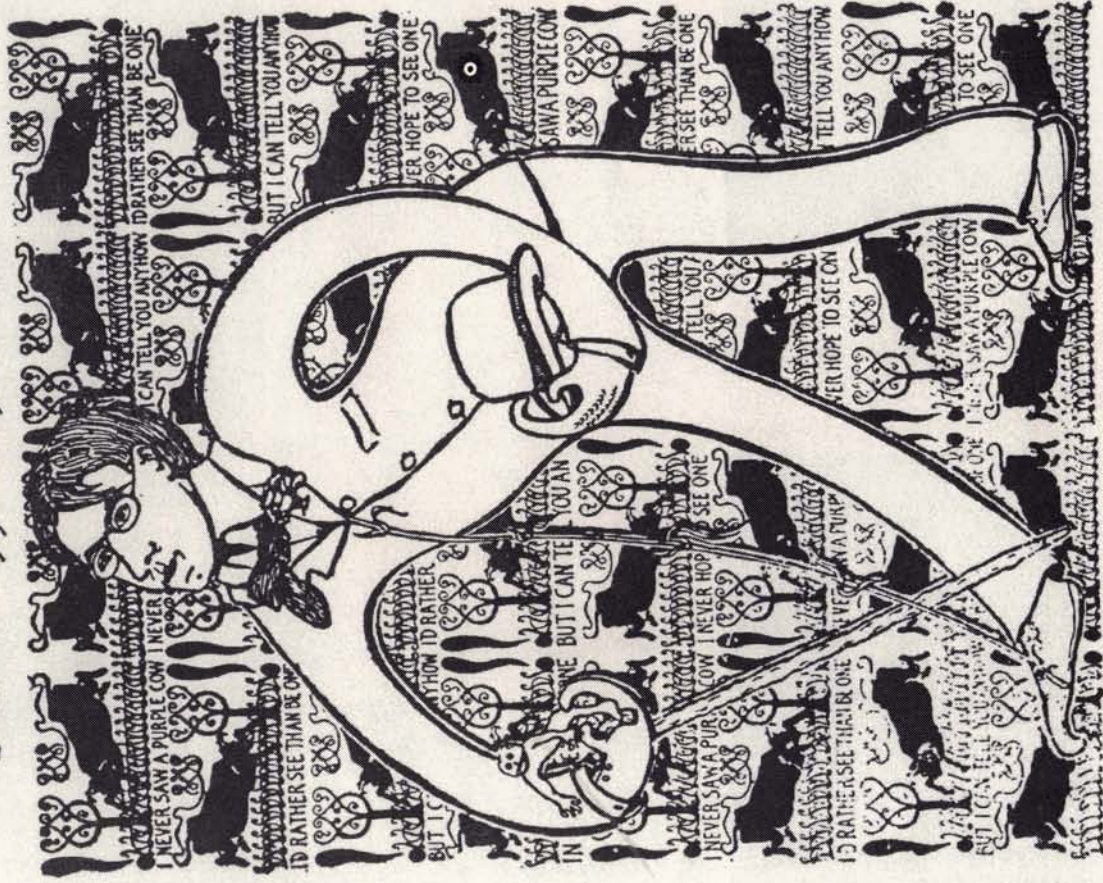
FOLIUM I.



H



Ab, yes, I wrote the "Purple Cow" —  
 I'm Sorry, now, I wrote it;



But I can tell you Anyhow  
 I'll Kill you if you Quote it!

I never saw a purple cow.  
 I hope to never see one.  
 But I can tell you here & now  
 I'd rather see than be one.

homage for Gelett Burgess on the centennial of  
 Le Petit Journal des Refusées, 1896,  
 to which the purple cow is related, I reckon.

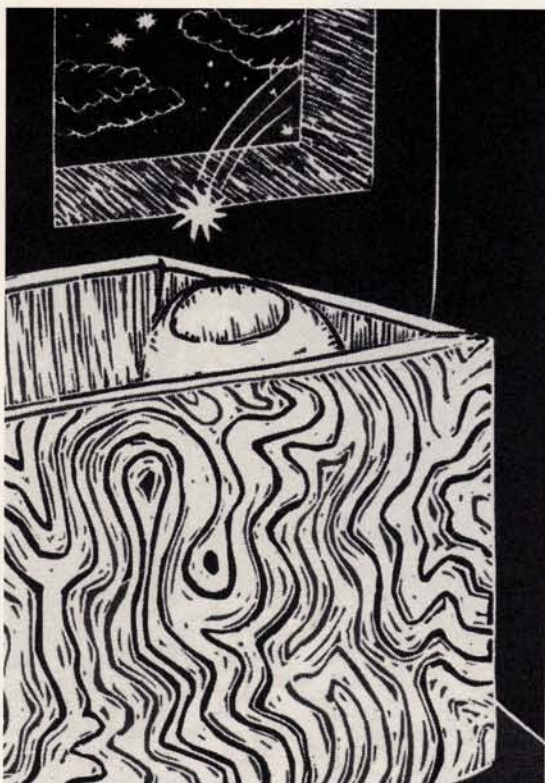
NW TOUR, BOOKS RECEIVED / BRIEF REVIEWS,  
ETC.

Brad Freeman

This past May two thirds of the JAB editorial board made a trip out to the Pacific Northwest on what could be called a book art tour. We met some people for the first time and visited a few old friends. In Seattle our hostess Sandra Kroupa set up two events where the JAB party line was allowed to be presented. Ms. Kroupa, being the generous book arts librarian at the University of Washington, also showed us artists' books by NW artists as well as the carmina figurata by Hrabanus Maurus pictured on the right.

One of the people we met and whose work we were particularly impressed with, Jules Remedios Faye, printed the cover for this issue. A three page sequence from her book *The Mechanical Dreamer, Il Signatore* is reproduced below. She describes it as, "a fabulous tale of Italian dreams told in linoblocks cut during the Perseid meteor showers". I've been a long time fan of the meteor showers as well as oddly connected events and the pictures in *The Mechanical Dreamer* have an intriguing edge. Jules comes from a fine press background which is evident in the meticulous construction of the book's binding

and careful attention to craft. The front cover has a soft image of (hard metal) gears floating in traditional paste paper liquid purple swirls. This visually subtle mixing of seemingly incongruent elements gently forces the viewer to take into account the mechanical processes used to make the book and hints at the one of the book's concepts. One page of expository text after the title page relates a dream by Hebdomeros who laments his lack of language and consequent emptiness even as he struggles toward the source of creativity. The dark visual narrative that follows is in fact another kind of language, maybe less precise, but suggestive and open ended in a way that written or spoken language can rarely be.



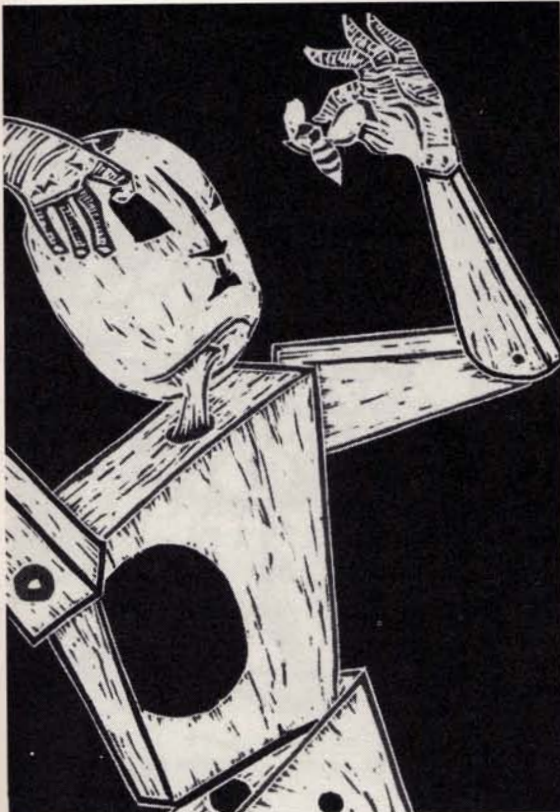
Jules Remedios Faye, *The Mechanical Dreamer*, 1993, three page sequence

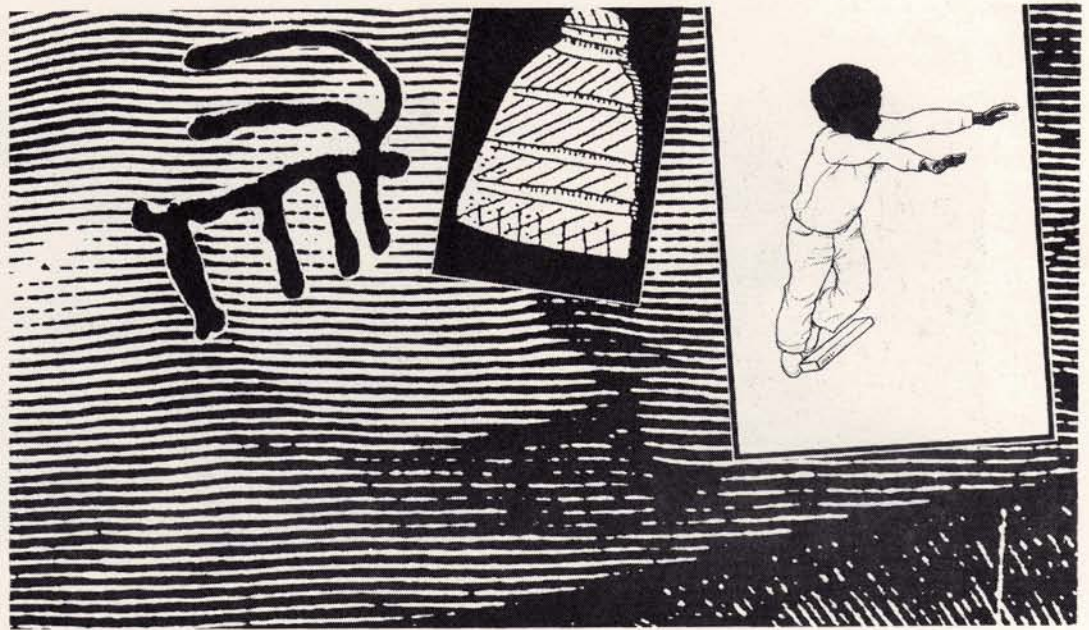


JD & SK@UWash.  
With a book by Chris Stern.



JD@UWash. Looking at a carmina figurata  
by Hrabanus Maurus (circa 16th century).





HE SEARCHED RANDOMLY FOR SOMETHING OF VALUE, NOT REALIZING THAT THE SMALL BLUE ENVELOPE CONTAINED HIS

FATHER'S WISDOM TEETH. HE LEFT WITH THE SMELL OF THE LIBRARY IN HIS NOSE. HIS OLFACTORY SOUVENIR WAS A QUASI-

**BRIEF REVIEWS, contd.,**

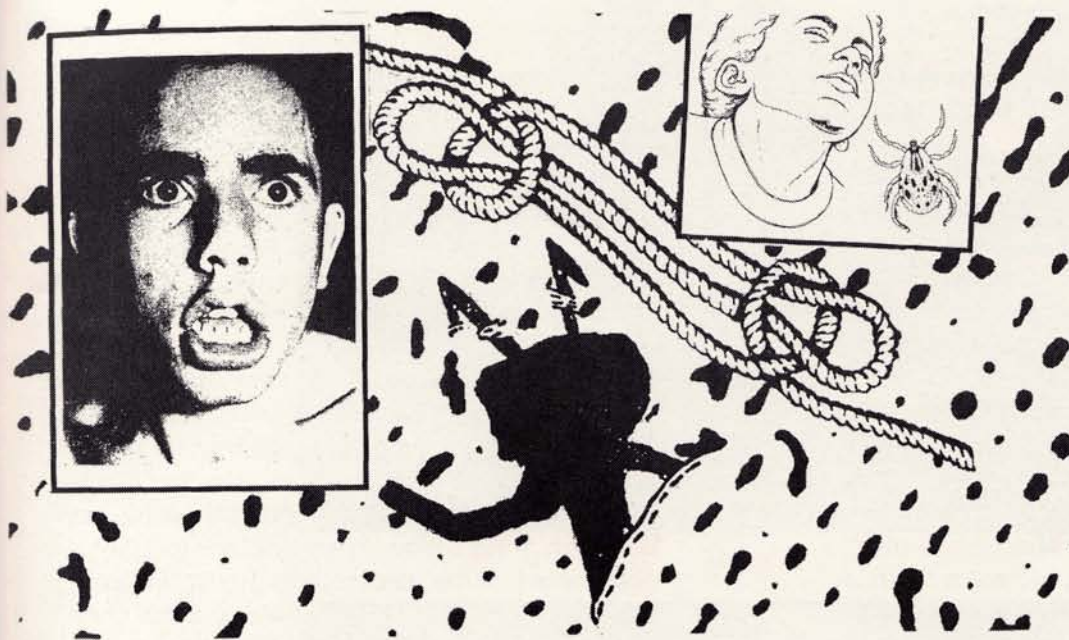
*OUTBOUND GOWANUS*, Gary Richman, 1995, Blue Book, 475 Tripps Corner Road, Exeter, RI 02822, USA

Imagine rush hour traffic leaving New York City on a muggy summer Friday. All those cars, engines hot, wrapped around their drivers. Butts cushioned against the metal, glass, and concrete, these drivers are in an infinite variety of mind states - mostly agitated. The title to Gary Richman's fifteenth book refers to outbound traffic on the Gowanus expressway. The Gowanus is either an expressway or highway or bridge, I'm not really sure. It's somewhere in the New York metropolitan area. I can't locate it on a map and haven't had the pleasure to be aware that I was ever on it. But it shows up regularly in the reports of the traffic net radio people (your eye in the sky). It's usually jammed with too many cars.

Not being on a map begins to describe *OUTBOUND GOWANUS* and the anxious zones it conjures up. Each spread tells a strange, convoluted story in high contrast pictures above and two or three sentences running below. The images

belong to a few categories; a head shot photo (from a medical text book?) of a person afflicted by some very unpleasant disease, a line drawing of a child either in the midst of an accident or being treated for an injury that recently occurred, a drawing of a highly magnified tick or flea, a complicated knot, a petroglyph, and some incomprehensible marks -- and all of this is placed on a background which is probably an enlarged detail of a drawing.

As in Richman's other books, the reader's eye is constantly moving back and forth between the images and the text trying to make some sense of their juxtaposition. One apparent non-sequitur after another occurs in his writing. The image fragments rub up against each other and create a disturbing friction, though Richman clearly has a sense of (dark) humor about the human condition. The idea of invoking "outbound Gowanus" as a metaphor for the human experience makes this clear: it's not a pretty picture that you get, staring at your fellow travelers in their steel and glass domes, performing semi-private acts in the all too public spaces of their autos. It doesn't inspire one



PERCEPTUAL CHOICE. THERE WAS NO IMMEDIATE LINK BETWEEN HIS SENSES AND HIS SELECTION. THE LOVE HE HAD NEVER SHARED WITH

THE OLD MAN WOULD TRAVEL PERPETUALLY IN THE WAKE OF A STILLBORN EXPECTATION.

to great feelings of humanistic affection, watching the follies, petty insanities, and real life modes of being of we human creatures. Richman's graphic vocabulary is striking, his sense of how to make a page punch is well-matched by the terse prose. The book is big enough that the open spreads engulf the reader in an active field of black and white contrasts of scale, density, and movement. The means of production are straightforward and minimal, made to work to full advantage, and the imagination is positively maxed-out no holds barred without limit.

Brief reviews contd., on page 28

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#### LETTER TO THE EDITOR

In Tanya Peixoto's "Report from London" in JAB5 she credits me with curating the exhibition of Artists' Books from the collection in the Tate Gallery Library which was held at the Tate in the Autumn of 1995. She also appears to say that the exhibition was so well attended that we had to turn visitors away.

I would be very grateful for the opportunity to correct both of these misunderstandings.

The exhibition was curated by Maria White, a member of the Library staff, and Cathy Courtney (who does indeed write about Artists' Books for *Art Monthly*). They also played a major role in organising the conference with the Tate Gallery Education Department. The exhibition was well-received and visited by a gratifying number of people. However overcrowding was never a problem - the turning away of people occurred at the conference on which your correspondent was also reporting, and which more than the 200 people which the auditorium can accommodate would like to have attended.

While I am very happy that both exhibition and conference seem to have been so successful, I certainly cannot be credited with either. My sole and humble role was to welcome the conference audience on behalf of the Tate Gallery.

- Beth Houghton, Head of Library and Archive  
Tate Gallery, London

## BRIEF REVIEWS, contd.,

*The Silence*, Gilles Peress, 1995, Scalo Publishers, c/o D.A.P. 636 Broadway, NY, NY 10012, USA

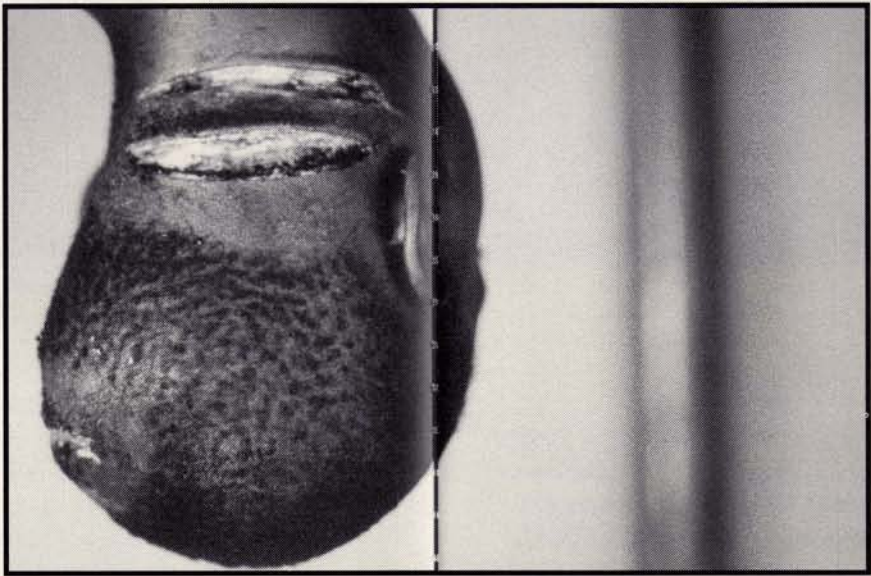
*The Silence* is a book by Gilles Peress of photographs he took of the genocidal slaughter in Rwanda from April to July, 1994. A separate pamphlet also titled "The Silence" accompanies the book. The pamphlet has a chronology of events written by Alison Des Forges of the Human Rights Watch / Africa. The chronology starts in 1897 when "Rwanda, an independent state for several centuries, begins 65 years of colonial control, first under the Germans, then under the Belgians". There were two groups of people in Rwanda in 1897. The Tutsi are members of an aristocracy who rule the mass of people known as the Hutu. They speak the same language and are not separate tribes, rather the lines between the two classes are flexible. As an individual gains or loses power or wealth that person may become Tutsi or Hutu. The Belgians misunderstood this amorphous social situation, and believed the two groups to be distinct and impermeable. In the 1930's they issued identity cards which privileged the minority elite Tutsi who made up fifteen percent of the population. These same cards, "will become their death warrants during the genocide". Details are given of the power struggles within the country and the foreign institutions providing monetary and military aid (the French government, Credit Lyonnais, etc.), and smaller scale killings (300 persons or so at a time) which slowly led to the unbelievable slaughter between April and July, 1994 when over 500,000 died. How can so many people be killed in such a short period of time? It took an organized effort headed by the Hutu dominated militia who forced civilian Hutus to kill their Tutsi neighbors. On April 24, "One hundred and sixty wounded Tutsi executed at Butare hospital. Militia give Hutu staff the choice of killing their Tutsi colleagues or of being killed themselves." As reported by the UN aide workers in Rwanda this scenario happened over and over.

The book begins with a photograph of, "a prisoner, a killer is presented to us, it is a moment of confusion, of fear, of prepared stories. He has a moment to himself." Photographs of the killing instruments follow - hundreds of machetes, clubs with spikes, spent magazine casings and cartridges. Then we are shown small huts with "Hutu" scrawled on the mud wall, a classroom with blackboard, a few chairs, and sprawled in

horrible disarray - bodies. Page after page of bodies in various stages of decomposition, left where they were hacked to death because there are no survivors. The dead are everywhere - in their homes, in churches, by the side of the road nothing but bones and a shirt. Sometimes they died alone, sometimes they were killed in groups, piled one on another, floating in rivers, all bloated.

Aside from the accompanying pamphlet, the title and author's name on the cover, the book has only a handful of spreads containing text. On these, white type stating facts of time and place drop out of a solid black background - stark, documentary information. In the final spread the prisoner looks into the camera lens. He is sitting on the ground with his knees drawn up to his chest, flanked by two other men who are only partly in the frame. His arms are wrapped to opposite shoulders, his head is cast down, but his eyes gaze up into the lens with a look of opaque, indecipherable intensity.

The cover, end sheets, and foreedges of the book are black, saturated with ink. The somberness and overwhelming horror of the events to which Peress's work bears witness is marked by the dark frame in which the images are presented. The absence of verbal commentary is balanced by the editorial stance of the photographs and no critical quibbling over the pros and cons of documentary photography can obviate the communicative import of *The Silence*. But it is also important not to read this as a testimony to the actions of remote tribes killing each other in some complex battles of their own -- but rather the opposite. This violence is in large part the result of the disruption of local communities and traditions, wrought by a form of newer colonialism and international corporate capitalism, in which the misperceptions of an outside group impose themselves with brutal effect upon an indigenous society and economy.



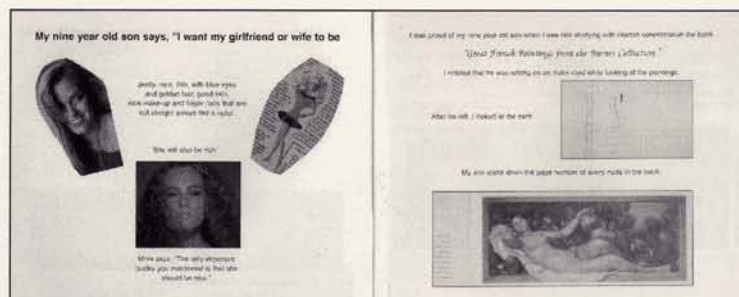
## BRIEF REVIEWS, contd.,

*Mother/Son Talk*, Gail S. Rebhan, 1996, Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, NY 14607, \$15.00, ISBN 0-89822-117-X

One of the problems of family life is the close scrutiny each member may experience. There is often no way out of this continuous surveillance by parents and siblings. Everybody is watching everybody else.

In elementary school I found a secret place to hide in the garage, up in the rafters where my dad had built some storage space. Comics and *Mad* magazine were frowned upon by my parents. I bought them anyway. Of course I didn't understand most of the jokes in *Mad* -- I didn't even know what was meant by Alfred E. Neuman's nickname, "What-me-worry?" I taped pictures from the comics on the wall in my little space. Pictures of Betty and Veronica from the Archie comics. I thought they were very sexy. I didn't really *think* they were sexy, but rather, had a good feeling when I looked at them. Thinking requires analysis and that surely wasn't happening. The hormones were kicking in and I was unconsciously preparing for the ride.

Upon first viewing *Mother/Son Talk* I was appalled by its unrelenting political correctness and clunky undesign. The Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation must have been happy indeed to read this from Ms. Rebhan's forward to the book, "This is an autobiographical book that examines issues pertaining to the complexity of family values." Safe and grant-oriented jargon. But the second time I sat down and read through the book I had more sympathy for it. Ms. Rebhan is trying to raise her sons responsibly, and with much attention (maybe too much) to the way the incidental responses to aspects of daily life are forming patterns of thought and response. It is a daunting task -- raising children and going through the constant awareness and regular exchange of



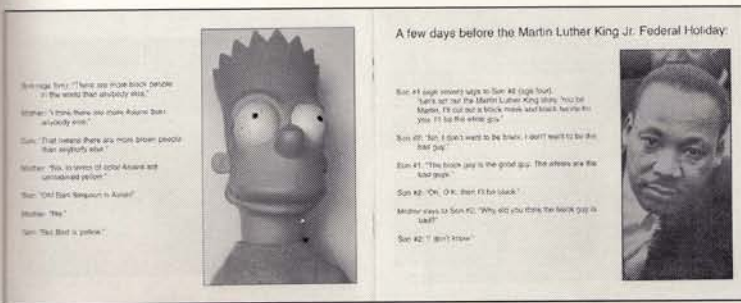
Gail S. Rebhan, *Mother/Son Talk*, VSW Press, 1996

gentle correction and guidance -- and I couldn't do it. I have the feeling that Ms. Rebhan's actual interactions with her children have much more variety, playfulness, and humor than comes through in this book. And maybe that is the problem -- the codification of what are indisputably "good" positions makes them seem more rigid and more claustrophobic than they would be in a personal situation. The honest attempt to generate a set of guidelines for dealing with the kinds of observations which come out of daily family life suffers in translation to book form -- it gets fixed on the page, stuck in what feel like sanctimoniously toned statements. It's easy to imagine saying to a kid that the most important qualities in a wife/girlfriend are that she be nice, but when it is stated in black and white it loses all the warmth of a spontaneous exchange. The wet-blanket aspect of politically correct behavior overwhelms, feel censorious, judgmental, and preachy -- as if there is something necessarily wrong with noting all the images of nudes in an art book, for instance. Taboos, as we know, charge their prohibited zones with an extra element of the forbidden. In general, however, the problem is that the subtlety and effective manipulation of the forces which Rebhan is trying to counter are far more seductive than the flat-footed statements with which she counters them. The perfections of the hegemonic mainstream are insidious in their potency. The counter discourse will have to up its ante if it's going to have any chance of making headway.

Sam Kash, *Surf Goddesses: Beauty Meets the Beach*, 1995, Radius Press, five page sequence







**Surf Goddesses: Beauty Meets the Beach, Sam Kash, 1995, Radius Press, P.O. Box 1271, FDR Station, New York, NY 10150, 158 pp. \$25.95**

Sam Kash goes to the beach and films young women and girls in bathing suits (preferably string-type). Then he projects the film and shoots it off the screen to make still photographs so that by the time they get transferred to film for printing, made into plates and offset, they have gone through several stages of mediation. There is no doubt that this book objectifies women, and fixates on the beautiful bodies of slim, firm, nearly nude young things for the sake of good old fashioned voyeuristic pleasure. In his forward Kash writes about beauty in the terms of outmoded formalism -- modernist notions which are nowadays very politically incorrect. Basically this is a T&A overload but it sure is fun to look at and we beta tested it on quite a wide range of audiences. Oddly enough the most uncomfortable response was from a young man in his early 20s who kept telling us how terrible the book was. Protesting too much? After all, Kash is not without his glimmers of enlightenment -- he makes the point in his preface that "beauty" comes in a wide variety of forms -- but his visual evidence comes from a fairly narrow band in the spectrum.

Thanks to Cristina Degennaro for the suggestion of reviewing these two books together.



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