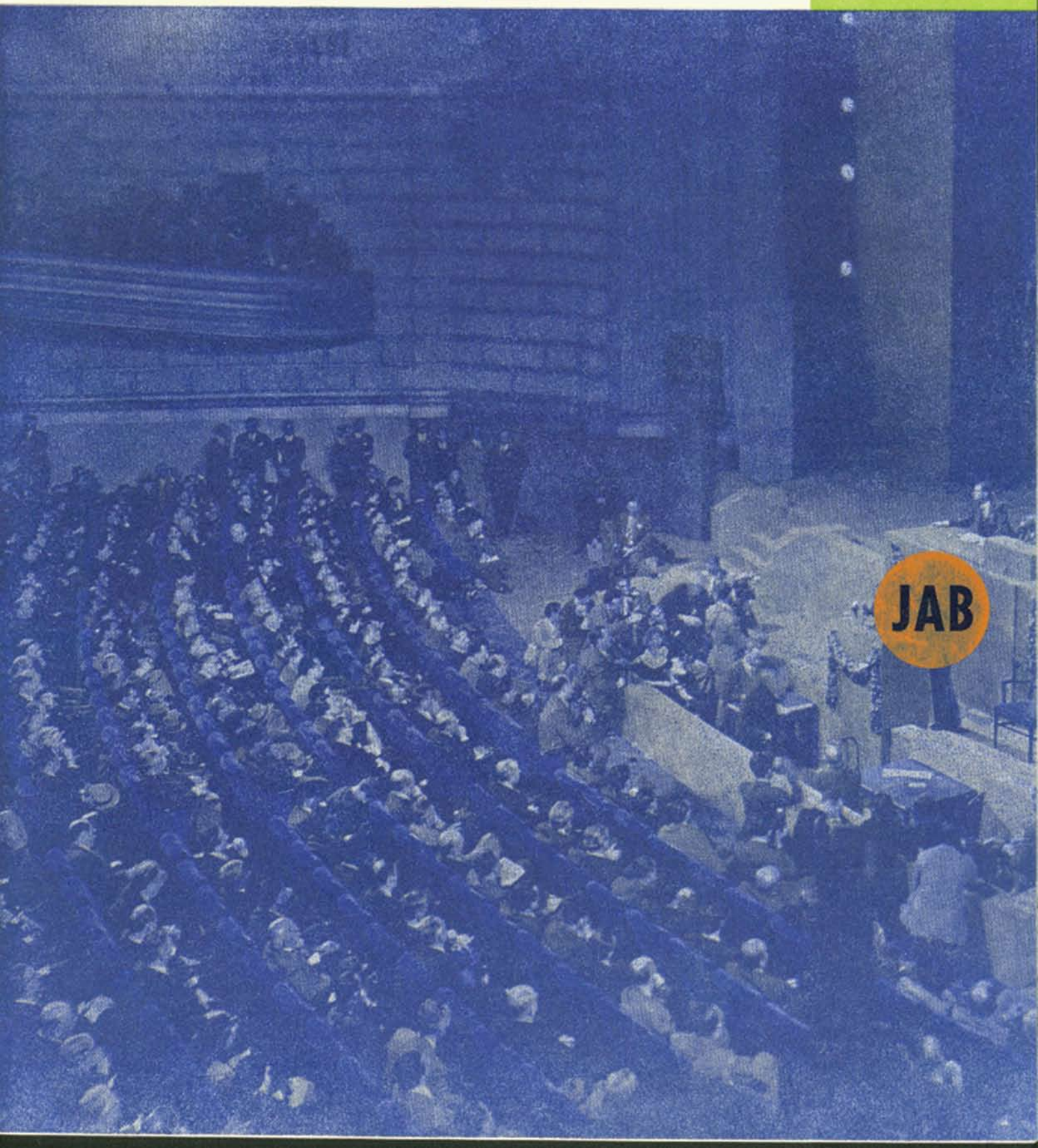


# JAB

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JAB

# *JAB10*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

(The first three articles in this issue concern d.a. levy)

page 1 - 17

THE BUDDHIST THIRDCLASS JUNKMAIL ORACLE  
THE LIFE, MYSTERIOUS DEATH  
AND COLLECTED POETRY & ART OF d.a. levy  
by Mike Golden

page 18 - 19

NOSTALGIA FOR RELEVANCE  
by Gary Sullivan

page 20 - 21

THE TIBETAN STROBOSCOPE OF d.a. levy  
BY STEVE CLAY

PAGE 22 - 24

CODEX ESPANGLIENSIS:  
AN ARTIST BOOK BY GUILLERMO GÓMEZ-PEÑA,  
ENRIQUE CHAGOYA AND FELICIA RICE  
REVIEWED BY EMILY McVARISH

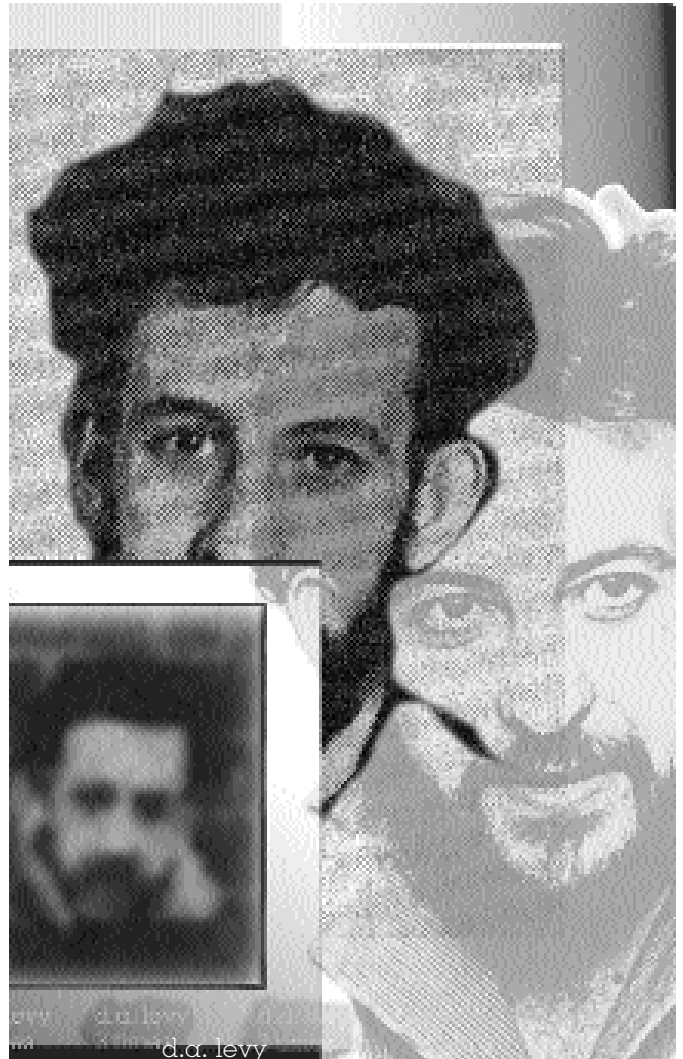
PAGE 25 - 30

BROACHING TEXTS AND READING MATERIAL:  
ARTIST BOOKS BY ROBBIN AMI SILVERBERG  
BY LOIS MARTIN

PAGE 31

IN MEMORIAM - TODD WALKER

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**THE BUDDHIST THIRDCLASS JUNKMAIL ORACLE**

**THE LIFE, MYSTERIOUS DEATH  
AND COLLECTED POETRY & ART OF d.a. levy**

**BY MIKE GOLDEN**

*"PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG MAN  
TRYING TO EAT THE SUN"*

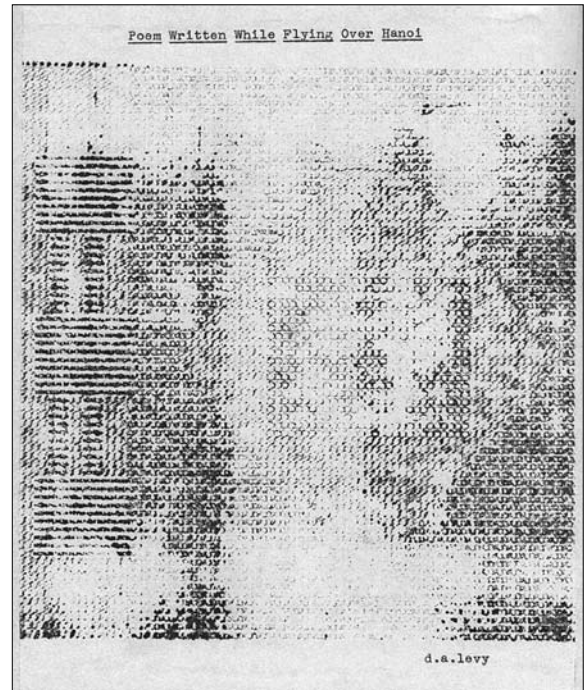
A note here, now, for a future biographer: I like blackouts. The energy feeds me. And I was a man of the light. But even out here, now, remembering the way it was, I still get paranoid . . . the CIA, the FBI are going to get me for something. I am levy, and I advocate nothing.

There never has been enough to go around. The right questions aren't asked. Meaningful answers never appear. Even words get lost. Lost words, wild words without a home wander endlessly for years, sometimes lifetimes, before they resurface and make an impression on a public of a different time. This is the story of d.a. levy, a controversial master of those wild words, who like an American Rimbaud, remains a major poetic influence long after he stopped writing. Just over 25 years ago, at the height of his powers, he was arrested and put on trial in his hometown basically for the crime of being a poet, and then after almost two years of extreme harassment by authorities and adulation by local hippies, either committed suicide or, as a number of his friends still believe, was murdered just as he was starting to be recognized as one of the major voices of his generation.

levy's story is a modern *Roshomon* filled with contradictions illuminating the dichotomies that appear on the path of the warrior-artist. His story, with a hint of some deep dark secret hiding in the shadows of counterculture history, is either about the corruption of a society destroying an artist, a kamikaze in search of immortality, a young mystic seeking spiritual transcendence, a tragic leader of a failed revolution, or a major undiscovered post-beat literary movement. Unquestionably it is the story of not only a genuine counterculture hero, but a major unrecognized artistic influence of the times, certainly a martyr on collision course

guaranteed to change your consciousness

/



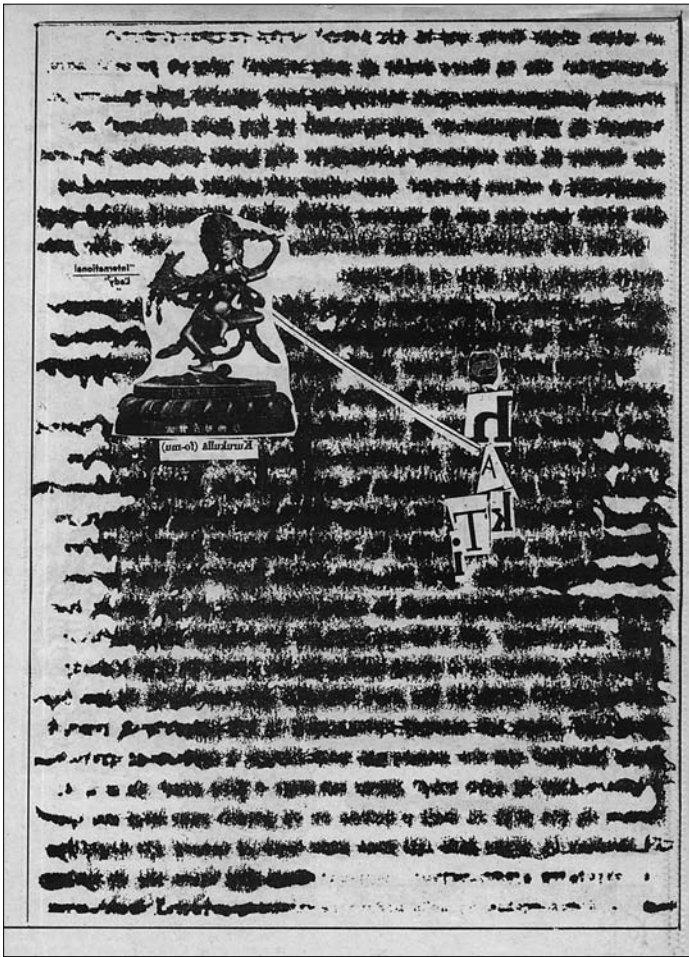
"Poem Written While Flying Over Hanoi", d.a. levy, mid 1960s

with his environment. Color it gray, set it in a very volatile-repressive time and you have Cleveland, Ohio in the heart of the 1960s.

Looking back, *Where were you and what were you doing when you heard the news?* is always the question associated with the important events of the times. Because like songs we used to dance to, like dreams we used to believe in, the indelible moments of the 60s stick in the mind's eye these days like commercials shattering the illusions of a spent youth; The President's young widow cradling his bloody head in her arms, the voice of Walter Cronkite out of time and place, announcing the beginning of an era, announcing *the King is dead! Long live the King!*

Remember the funeral, the mythology that goes along with that 21 gun salute? The body politic retired, flying from Dallas to Washington with the corpse of the dream, only to watch it reborn and then die again in 1968, five years later in Memphis, then again, coming in like a back beat several months after that in a hotel kitchen





d.a. levy, "Tibetan Stroboscope, 1", mid 1960s

contd., from page 1

in Los Angeles, as the train once again carries the corpse of the dream home, while a generation out to save the world from its own hypocrisy marches in the streets of Chicago as the police bust skulls and riot in protest of their protest.

It all happened too fast though. And before we knew it the species evolved into making "one giant step for mankind" on the moon, while down here on lonely earth that same generation that marched in the streets gave birth to the dream again, rolling and bonding and boogying in the mud at Woodstock, only to watch it bleed four months later in the dirt at Altamont, while back down the coast in La La Land *Helter Skelter* was going off for real up in Hollywood Hills.

What a time, huh? Call this thing Vietnam, call it rock'n'roll, call this thing a most uncivil war if you like, a generational war over cultural values, a war that was so emotional, so explosive, so all inclusive and bloody exhausting it had to wait another decade for a punctuation, when *The Walrus* got himself 86'ed by some psycho-zombie *Terminator* from *Strawberry Fields*, this one, obviously for irony's sake, carrying a copy of *Catcher in the Rye* in

his back pocket. Oh, *Let it Bleed* indeed!

If it were fiction no one would ever believe this crescendo of events. Much less the light and dark characters who appeared on stage and spoke their lines and then were suddenly gone, blowing in the wind like players in some postmodern Shakespearean tragedy we seem to be stuck measuring the rest of our lives by. They were all media stars too: Jack & Jackie, Janus & Jimi, RFK & MLK and LBJ & LSD and J. Edgar Hoover and Marilyn and Castro and Che and Tricky Dickie and Oswald and Manson and Ruby and Abbie and The Chicago Seven and The Black Panthers and the Purple Haze and Dr. Leary and the Merry Pranksters and even G. Gordon Liddy eating rat to prove he's a man.

Somehow in all of this hoopla d.a. levy got lost. levy, little "l", big force, had an extraordinarily large and powerful body of work that was published in underground presses and literary magazines all over America by the time he died at 26 years old. Working literally without the benefit of money, but with a driven energy and focus, he almost single-handedly created a scene in Cleveland, producing hundreds of chapbooks, pamphlets, magazines and newspapers on a small hand letterpress his brother found for him. From 1963 to 1968 his *Seven Flowers Press*, *The Marrahwana Quarterly* and *The Buddhist Third Class Junkmail Oracle* published scores of poets, writers and artists, as well as many then relatively unknowns from all over the underground press circuit, such as Charles Bukowski, R. Crumb and Ed Sanders, to name but a few who went on to achieve international acclaim.

Maybe if he had gotten out of Cleveland he wouldn't have been swallowed by the times, his reputation and work would have already transcended the boundaries of a regional underground cult figure. Or perhaps 26 years after this ancient young buddha-head supposedly opened his third eye by cradling a .22 rifle between his legs and (as the story has been constructed and embellished) totally relaxing all the muscles in his body before triggering the blast with his own bare toes, he, like most poets who refused the sanctuary of academia, might still have trouble getting paid for his work in the world. But without question, two and a half decades after his still controversial death in a poorly furnished one-bedroom apartment in East Cleveland, his voice rings as strong and true as it did after he was charged with obscenity by a grand jury in November 1966, and arrested and put on trial in March of the following year for contributing to the delinquency of minors (for reading poetry in a church sponsored coffeehouse in front of two high school kids).

Editorial note

On TARot, PALMistry & the skull mandala

The deep-image poets: It suddenly occurred to me - the mysterious deep-image poets were only scratching the surface of their minds - or one day my own digging inside the skull, I discovered a "depth of simplicity" (difficult to return to/but it is there) - no moonwhores only the sun & pleasant solitude. Most of my dark deep poetry is very consciously satirical, cynical & funny (to me anyway)... DREAMS (in zen etc) are mind-shit-Sur-real is distortion - the humor in my poems to bail out or drop thru their minds into the inner sky . . . & all images are clarified when seen with a clear mind the mystery of the Occult is only a Sign of our Ignorance. . .

- Grand DaDa crayon master, levy '66 / Marrawhanna Quarterly, Vol. 2 #4

A scrawny, shy, half-Jewish kid (on his father's side) who embraced Buddhism, levy grew up in a working-class neighborhood around 65th and Lorain, innocuously went through Rhodes High, collected stamps, and Bs, and was remembered simply enough in his senior yearbook as "Hey you."

He was advised to go to college, but joined the Navy instead. Seven months later, however, he was back, discharged for "manic depressive tendencies."

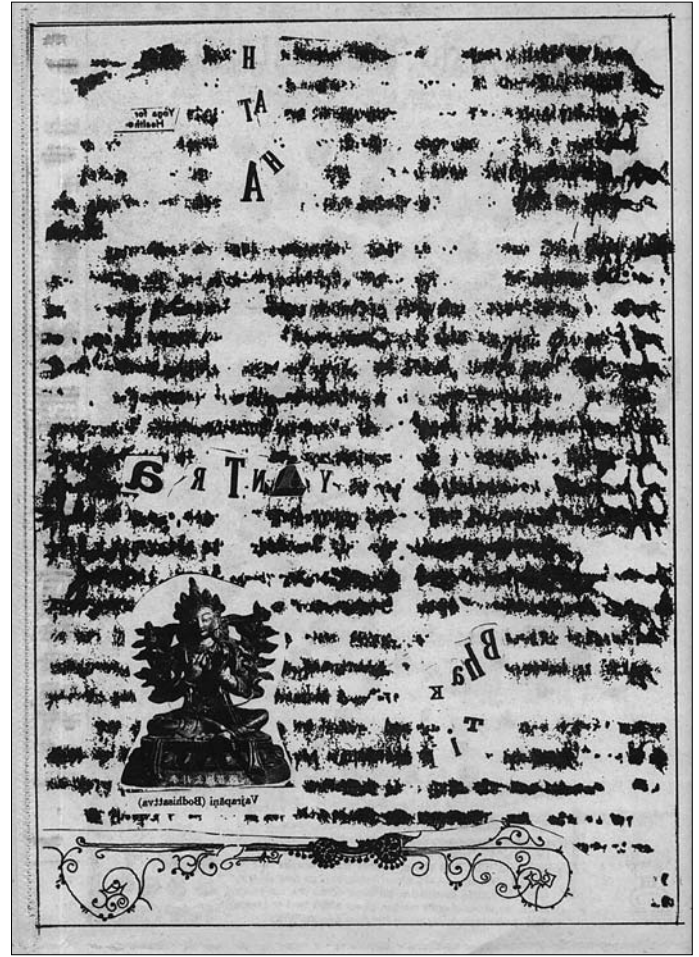
Much later, after he was arrested, he wrote,

"Unable to find competent leaders or teachers, unable to discover intelligent persons in places of authority, unable to find anything other than pseudo-christian bigotry and ignorance - I decided to commit suicide at 17. Changed my mind at the last minute and started to read everything and wrote poems."

Hundreds and hundreds of poems. Poems about Cleveland, poems about growing up in America, poems about transcending his own consciousness, in the midst of the overwhelming chaos of the times.

"City"  
no sounds here except  
window rattles  
wind  
trucks screaming  
children shouting  
on the streets  
moon hanging  
over the rooftops  
(that's my sound)

Dropping his name to the lower case, Darryl Allen Levy first became known to other Cleveland poets as d.a. levy while he was living in a grungy garret overlooking the Cuyahoga River and the Cleveland Flats, with poet Russell Salomon. There,



d.a. levy, "Tibetan Stroboscope, 2", mid 1960s

looking out on the sprawling industrial waste, he started composing hundreds of long, rambling odes filled with references to the arcane Eastern religious texts he devoured, mixed with the language of the streets he walked.

"We were going to make Cleveland famous," Salomon recalled. "I was in college - we met at a poetry reading. He was still living with his folks in Avon, 30 miles west of the city, on Lake Erie. He'd already been around - hitched to Mexico twice and San Francisco once. He was very impressed with the way they treated poets in Mexico. Not like here. He moved in with me - I had this five room place on the bluffs overlooking the Flats - it had a great picturesque view of downtown and the polluted river running through it. The woman underneath us had something like 40 cats, so it always smelled. levy used the living room. I told him as long he produced he could stay (rent free). He was writing *Cleveland Undercovers* at the time. And I was writing another long poem called *Descent into Cleveland*. I remember he always used to say, 'When I finish writing this poem I'm gonna kill myself.' But he was so busy he always got hooked into something else. He was about to throw away *Cleveland Undercovers* page 4

couldn't make it work, so I said 'lemme take a look at it.' I reversed stanzas two and three, really nothing else, and he said, 'that's it'. And it was, except for a few minor things."

- from *Cleveland Undercovers*  
but that was then  
Now i am, and do not expect  
tomorrow or yesterday today.  
instead i write in exstasy  
and when someone stops to say  
"Hey, that's not true!"  
i yell backwards,  
"For who . . . and fuck rhyme."  
i have a city to cover with lines,  
with textured words &  
the sweaty brick-flesh images of a  
drunken tied-up whorehouse cowtown  
sprawling and brawling on its back.

He reminded Salomon a lot, "of that character Japhy Ryder [based on Gary Snyder] in Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*. He was really into Eastern mysticism, totally against drugs. He advocated using 'em because he advocated the freedom to do so.

"That stuff about him being a manic depressive was absolute bullshit. He joined the Navy, he made a mistake. It took him about a month to decide he wanted out - so he faked being crazy. The highs and lows he went through, naturally come with what he was doing.

"But make no mistake, he did it! He was planning to do it, and he did it! It was an explanation point. He was hooked into Rimbaud, the idea that he just walked away from poetry. He was going to stick around Cleveland and make a point. Like the Indians, he tied himself to a spear. He was a spiritual being - believed in the continuance of the soul - he was ready to leave his body behind.

"I got drafted in '65, so I missed that real heavy time there. I came home in '69, and asked, 'where's levy?' I wasn't surprised by what he did, but fuck . . . fuck . . ."

*The heavy time*, the years '66, '67 and '68 were also the days of "the Mimeo Revolution", according to what that infamous dirty old man, Charles Bukowski, told me in 1988. Like levy in Cleveland, Bukowski was cranking out literary mags in Los Angeles, like *Laugh Literary* and *Man the Humping Guns*. "We were the Meat poets, baby. We got down to the bone. levy, Doug Blazek in Chicago, some pretty good writing came out of that period. Not like today. Too many out there with too little to say."

Bukowski, whose fame in America (primarily because of the film *Barfly*) was just starting to catch up with what the Europeans had known since the mid 70s, took a long pause when thinking back on

that period, and in his inimitable Fieldsian twang reflected, "levy published a little book of mine, *The Genius Of The Crowd* but I never really knew him except through his letters and the mags. I guess I played the Ezra Pound role of the group, and had some luck. levy didn't have the luck, it's a terrible shame, he was just starting to develop. What killed him? I don't know, baby. Cleveland, the cops, lack of money, I don't know . . . He should have held on."

From the start his mimeoed poetry and underground newspaper stuck in the craw of the sleepy city fathers. He used language that Cleveland had never seen in print before. Like *The Chicago Seed*, *The Berkeley Barb*, *Rat*, *The Great Speckled Bird*, *The San Francisco Oracle*, and dozens and dozens of others across America, Cleveland was under attack from the counterculture and levy assaulted his city saying *fuck you* with both political and artistic purpose. He went directly after the real estate interests, after the police and the narcs, and became the most visible figure in Cleveland's burgeoning youth culture. He and his friends (D.R Wagner, rjs, T.L. Kryss, Kent Taylor, John Scott, Geoffrey Cook, Steve Ferguson, Franklin Osinski . . . ) became known as *The Underground Thought Patrol*. Like a matador taunting a bull, they took the battle straight to the enemy, and probably were initially surprised, like most kids who joined "The Revolution", by the ferocity and dirty tactics of the establishment's response to their public undressing.

On December 1, 1966, James Lowell's Asphodel Bookshop was raided downtown, on the excuse of a search for non-existent drugs. The Asphodel, the sole outlet for levy's publications at the time, was a nationally known literary mecca, filled with crates of levy's material, to be used as evidence for the obscenity indictments of levy and Lowell, and were never returned, even after the charges were dropped. Nor was the mimeo machine, levy's printing press, the voice of the underground that the police took from his apartment.

To this day, Lowell can barely speak about it, or about levy. "What would be the point?" he asks. "It's too late now." An attitude a number of people who were part of the scene embrace, with a full house of emotions, ranging from the obvious blocking of an open wound to the blood flowing out in anger.

Allen Ginsberg, who came to Cleveland with The Fugs for a benefit for levy at Case Western Reserve University, recalled, "[levy] seemed to be very much affected by the put down and the jailing or arrest and trial. It was obviously a trumped up charge. Cleveland was a very heavy police state in a very literal way. The Cleveland police were notorious for their outrageousness and for their storm trooper tactics." Now in California, but then a

Chicago poet and one of levy's closest allies, Doug Blazek concurred: "The Cleveland police made the Chicago police look like Boy Scouts."

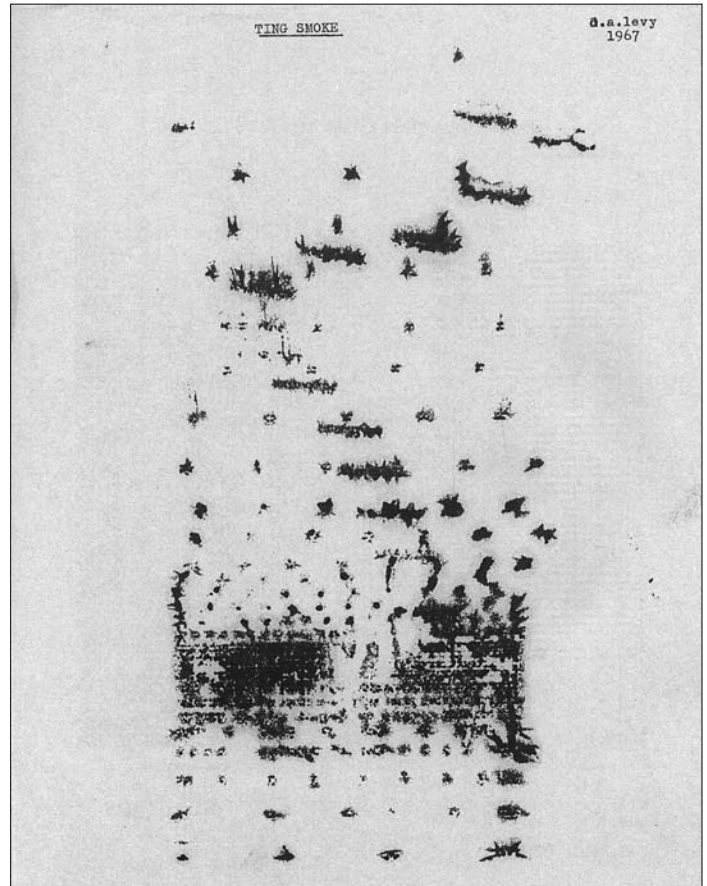
"It was a grim scene," according to cartoonist R. Crumb, who came to Cleveland from Philadelphia when he was 19, because he had a friend who dropped out of Kent State and invited him to share an apartment. "What did I know? Cleveland was a place where a lot of sensitive middle class kids - outcasts - committed suicide, and this, was before LSD! The scene was filled with depression, a beatnik kind of sensibility. I remember getting giggly on grass once, and they all turned on me." Crumb met levy in '66, and thought he "took everything to heart - took it all so personal. And there was no relief. They lived like the ultimate cool thing to do was blow yourself away. He was very depressed and didn't seem to have a sense of humor. I remember the last time I saw the guy his face was just contorted in pain."

"He was one of the funniest men I ever met," D.R. Wagner disagreed. Now a visual artist who makes miniature tapestries, Wagner was one of levy's closest friends, and with his magazine *Run-cible Spoon*, one of the major forces, along with levy, in the concrete poetry movement. "[levy] published a very early book of Ed Sanders called *King Lord Queen Freak* when Sanders was doing *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts*. It was one of the first things that Sanders ever published. levy was inspired, I think, by Tuli Kupferberg, the poet and composer and co-founder of The Fugs. Tuli's *Birth Press* published many things [probably the best known was *1001 Ways To Beat The Draft*] . . . all silliness . . . using a lot of linocuts. I think levy liked the style of those things." levy was supposedly getting out of Cleveland, coming to California to stay with Wagner, when his body was found.

Tony Walsh, a Cleveland lawyer and friend who lived around the corner from levy when he died, and made the funeral arrangements, always saw a bit of Portnoy - Woody Allen in levy. "He was very funny despite what was happening to him," Walsh laughed. "I have his ashes, actually half his ashes. His family has half - I have half. Sometimes I wonder which half," he laughed again.

"The Noel Coward of Bohemia", Tuli Kupferberg, couldn't find anything particularly funny about dying in Cleveland. "Cleveland has always been known as one of the assholes of America - levy could've been one of a dozen different guys living in the Village, but for some reason he had to live in Cleveland."

Poet Kent Taylor, who like many Cleveland poets now lives in Northern California, was married to levy's cousin, so besides being in the inner circle, was family. "He didn't really function well outside of



d. a. levy, "Ting Smoke", part of the "Destructive Writing Series", mid 1960s

Cleveland. We went to the west coast together, but he couldn't wait to get back. He always went back to Cleveland like it was a magnet, even though it was an evil magnet for him."

When he did get out on occasion, and came to New York, he stayed with poets Carol Berge or the late Allen Katzrnan. In Berges' opinion, "levy was suicidal - he saw the world as it really is at a too early age," she recalled years later, from her studio in Santa Fe. "He was truly looking for a way to accept the way things were." Later, after she thought about it, she exploded. "Why bring him up? Let him rest! There's no immortality! levy quit: I'll never forgive him for that!"

Woodstock Renaissance man and lead Fug Ed Sanders, who had a close correspondence with levy during those years, still feels the loss after all this time. "For me personally, it was the first time that a death created a wound. d.a. was intense - he didn't want to be driven out of Cleveland like Hart Crane. The whole thing, cleaning up the poets, the reason they wanted to get rid of them was a real estate scam as I understand it. They were going to re-develop the area: Its origin was greed."

"That whole corner [115th & Euclid] mysteriously burnt down a couple of years later," according

contd., on page 6

to Franklin Osinski, another Cleveland poet who lives in Northern California. "levy wrote about the scheme to take over University Circle in the early issues of *The Buddhist Third Class Junkmail Oracle*. He named names, and laid out their plan, which was to get many of these homes that were dilapidated, properties that were run down and getting them real cheap. Whether arson was involved, who knows? But in that winter of 66-67 was when the kids got wind of it. That summer, what the media called "the summer of love", all the teenagers moved into the scene. At that point the city fathers and authorities saw it as rather dangerous. They didn't want their daughters being involved. They evidently saw levy as dangerous. As a dangerous type of youth leader."

Steve Ferguson, who along with R J. Sigmund (rjs or rj) found the body, and took over publishing *The Oracle* after the poet's death, said that levy was not unaware of his effect on people. "He knew he was the great Poobah, and he wore the crown."

John Scott, a man with a definite sense of black humor, held the unofficial title of levy's bodyguard. "My job," he laughed from Northern California, "was to protect him from himself. You've got to understand, I wasn't a poet, I was a hard core greaser. levy was my best friend, for a lot of different reasons. He was a good person, a genuinely good person. But he was not happy in the world. He'd always been suicidal - he knew his perceptions were different from other people. One time I asked him, 'What if there isn't anything else, what if this is it?' He got quiet then retreated. If there was somewhere else to go, he was going."

Scott was in the workhouse when levy died, doing 30 to life. Set up, he claimed, by an informer inside the group. "The scene was totally littered with informers." Scott did two years. When they arrested him he said they told him, "It isn't you we want, it's d.a. If you *make* d.a. you're home free."

"In my opinion he did not want to die. From what I heard he borrowed suitcases from Cuz [levy's real cousin]. You don't pack your bags for that kind of journey. The only ones who might really know are Ferguson and rjs." Scott laughed again. "I guess I'm the only one with an airtight alibi."

Besides Scott, a number of others including levy, and then rjs, did time for contributing to the delinquency of minors. Many years after the action, George Moscarino, the former assistant county prosecutor who handled levy's case, told *Cleveland Magazine*, "Most of our information came from young people who were arrested, they gave us information about their friends."

While most American kids grew up playing Cowboys and Indians, in the late 60s that game had

evolved to Feds and Heads. In Cleveland it was known as Cowboys and Poets. Though there's little doubt that poets would become ignored in any other time frame, this was not any other time frame. It was the heart-beat of the counterculture, the beginning of the psychedelic revolution, and the kids poured out of Cleveland Heights and Shaker Heights to be a part of it. Mostly they congregated on Euclid Ave., just east of 115th St., on the edge of University Circle. They poured into Adele's Bar, Stanley Heilburn's head shop, the Coffee House, and Sam Dogan's Bookspot, where levy helped stock the shelves with poetry, and where he met Mara (Dagmar) Ferek.

Fresh out of Cleveland Heights High, with the looks of a working class Madonna, she immediately got caught up in the scene on Euclid. She was across the street at Adele's, then went into the bookstore. "I had no idea he was a poet", she told filmmaker Kon Petrochuck, while he was researching his award winning levy documentary *If I Scratch, If I Write*. "He acted like he was doing me a favor by going out with me," she recalled. "I wasn't attracted to him as a poet, he could've been a garbageman. I was attracted to him as a person. It was kinda funny, he really pushed the idea he was a poet all the time. I didn't really care, but he sure did!"

"He was a scrawny little dude [5'7", 117 lbs.]. He looked like he needed a mother. Poet in search of a mother," she laughs. "I don't know, he was used to people running after him. I didn't understand it. I mean, I was at an age where I was trying to find something better than the other people, ya know, my parents, etc., had gotten. And I was smoking and hanging around with interesting people, like musicians and stuff. I guess he just kinda fit in that whole thing."

Steve Ferguson, a writer and graphic artist who still lives in Cleveland, recalled, "levy was very concerned with style to the point of being silly. When too many people started growing their hair long he thought it didn't mean anything anymore. Truthfully, he wanted the kids to all go back home and let us create our own alternate universe." The *us*, which became known as *The Underground Thought Patrol*, was not really a gang. "It wasn't that tight-knit, it was really an island of lost souls," Ferguson explained. "As for drugs, levy was a wimp. Couldn't drink more than a beer, beer and a half - couldn't do more than a couple of tokes. At his worst he was paranoid. He was crippled by the police attention. He had become the scapegoat for every Cleveland daughter that ran away during that period."

According to Jonathan Dworkin, levy's first lawyer, "Drugs to levy was an experience, not a way of life - they were an attempt to find a real error through trial and error."



Dagmar recalled, "People wanted to think he was into drugs because a lot of people were into drugs, and they felt they should get him on something - so the police tried that, but he was almost anti-drugs. The only thing he was into was hallucinogenics - and he used those very sparingly. He believed people should consciously put themselves in a place and then come back consciously, rather than take a drug, get somewhere, and then not know how you got there or how you got back. Because some people didn't come back! That was one of the things about his whole interest in Buddhism; it taught consciousness expansion that was a gradual process. It was kinda like a school - you get so far and you learn where you're at, and then you come back, and then you go back out again."

"It all started over the existence of God," according to Ferguson. "That single fact has more to do with levy's suicide than anything else. It's my speculation that because he was a heavy student of Buddhism, which believes there's no God, he had no support system to fall back on. I think he was trying to work his way through a puzzle and just ran short of hope."

#### REBIRTH BLUES

You know, whenever I think about becoming  
 an angel / a bodhisattva / a rain deer  
 locking antlers with the clouds  
 I     MARUT  
 chariot rolling on blue sky  
 knocking down war monuments  
 with thunder bolts & a good screw  
 a meal of tantric mulligan stew  
 spooning the last drops of the pot  
 with grass fumes until the Astral POP  
 (can we hold hands out here? can we  
 touch the mind electricity of our  
 aethereal love forms?)  
 Whenever I think  
 of becoming, say, a poet  
 a master of wild words before they die  
 I ask, should I water them and suffer  
 VERB SPASMS of the action writer  
 & if i wrote what i wanted to write  
 it would be as empty as becoming  
 what I want to become?  
 listen you fuck-offs  
 MOVE OUT into the Universe Juice  
 YOU'RE FLUNKING YOUR OWN DEATHS, SHMUCKS!  
 Whenever I think about becoming  
 anything i get scared  
 & start thinking  
 it must be a wonderful thing  
 to be like everybody else  
 so terrified of death they

can not even remember it,  
 so frightened of the responsibility  
 of becoming ANYTHING they struggle to do  
 nothing & Oh hell,  
 i didn't really want to be an angel anyway  
 no one would understand & the  
 pay is lousy  
 it's one of those non-union jobs  
 keeps you on the floor  
 weeping  
 for me to stop murdering me  
 with the survival illusion  
 whenever i think about becoming  
 ANYTHING

"He was like Jeremiah," Ed Sanders whispered. "He had the potential to be a great religious writer - a prophet. No doubt, he could have developed . . . The weight of all his different hats crushed him before he even reached Shelley's age." Going through his archives, while being interviewed by a young reporter and photographer from *Interview* (about the regrouping of The Fugs' *Star Peace*, the full scale American opera he wrote and recorded with them, and of course those not so peaceful days of *Auld Lang Hippy*) Sanders pulls a letter from levy (Jan 12, 1965) out of his files.

"dear ed,  
 i have no words. . . when on paper i think perhaps i am losing everything or leaving everything via negation behind . . . with drugs. . . but i don't take drugs anymore or haven't for a long time . . . someone told me (a Philly chick) 'last year the world turned over . . . its doing it again this year'. what the fuck is happening? all i know is its a mind thing from one end of this country to the other . . . perhaps the whole world but i am not in contact with any place other than the US. A voice in mexico city, also trembling from canada. How much do you know?

Have you read *The Sacred Mushroom - Key to the door of Eternity?* It is a bridy murphy thing in egypt. How aware are you of yr Egyptianish poems. I am not finished with the book but turn on like a light bulb cosmic high when reading it.

last night (No time anymore) went to adele's bar with friends. . . i drank a little ginger ale and got euphorically drunk . . . maintained high degree of control knew where people were in their heads (or felt consciously where they were at - could not definitely pin it down)

I still get paranoid . . . the cia fbi are going to get me for something (burn this letter) many people here becoming very sensitive perceptive."

Geoffrey Cook, who considered himself best friends with levy in 1966, recalled the pressure of the times. "He was a big fish in Cleveland. He was a

writer of place like (Robinson) Jeffers. He was living his life at a brutal speed. He wasn't getting enough food, his teeth were falling out - he virtually broke down when he went through the legal trouble. He closed himself off - his friends stopped being his intellectual and artistic peers - rjs was one of those friends. He got paranoid about myself and Kent Taylor. I don't know why. There was a lot of stress on all of us. A lot of us moved out to the west coast. The rumor was that he was dying - no doubt, the Assistant D.A. murdered levy by hounding him to the point of suicide."

But the lead prosecutor in the levy trial, George Moscarino, had a hard time remembering the facts in the case, and questioned why the story was at all "newsworthy". In a telephone interview from his law office in Cleveland he continually suggested that it would be more appropriate to talk to the levy defense attorney, Gerald Gold. Speaking in rapid fire staccato burst, Moscarino reiterated, "I don't know where the story is, though I do remember he was a poet. And I do remember it was a cult time and it was a time of a lot of drugs. Whether he was involved in other things or not I don't know, although the court records don't show that. So the man's dead, may he rest in peace. I believe he's dead, isn't he? I remember that there were people who liked his poetry, and I did not judge his poetry. I'm a literate person and - talk to Gerry [Gold], he'll tell you a little about my reputation. So will my other lawyer. But I just don't have a reputation for keeping files or remembering what happened that far back."

He certainly couldn't remember who James Lowell was, or that his books and levy's press were confiscated and not returned. "He probably never asked for it," Moscarino insisted. "There are ways to get property back. I don't think there's a story there. If he didn't ask for his property back, he didn't get it, right. That's not newsworthy. If he had had me as his lawyer, if his bookstore was raided, if it was illegal or even done legally, I'd have gotten his books back for him.

"I'll tell you one thing," Moscarino said, "I didn't have anything to do with that, I'm sure of that!"

Gerald Gold put it somewhat differently: "George Moscarino now defends criminal cases, big ones, for one of the biggest law firms in the country. He was the prosecutor then, and he was out to get d.a."

In November 1966, a grand jury indicted levy on charges of obscenity. He found out about the charges in the morning newspaper delivered to his door, but before police arrived that morning he had moved into John Scott's apartment in Collinwood and went into hiding. Shortly afterward, on December 1, Lt. Burt Miller, the head of Cleveland Narcotics Bureau, raided Lowell's bookstore, and along with

levy's material confiscated the dangerous works of Robert Duncan. On January 16, 1967, levy wrote in *The Oracle*, "to prevent the police from further harassment, I have decided to turn myself in."

In court the next day, the prosecutor told the Judge, "this man is not eligible for personal bond. He has evaded police since his indictment, which has been publicized for two weeks. He has no job and no address."

"You write poetry . . . do you sell it?" Municipal Court Judge Frank Celebrezze asked.

"I sell poetry for 89 cents a day," levy replied, though in truth, it wasn't quite that much, and he lived on Dagmar's waitress earnings.

"Bail of \$2,500 is not excessive for a great poet. Maybe you should charge more than 89 cents," proclaimed the Judge.

A New York art dealer, Jasper Wood, posted levy's bond, and he was set free after spending about a week in the County Jail. By this time his conflicts with the police were rapidly turning him into a public figure, by far the major spokesman in the city for the counterculture. Both newspapers, *The Plain Dealer* and the now defunct *Cleveland Press*, called for an end to what they saw as harassment, and they devoted generous space to each new development in the drama, thus helping to build the legend and enhance his reputation.

In response to his arrest, he wrote in *The Oracle*,

"Not having money, the only escape mechanism I have had is very much an American tradition. I started swearing at each new piece of bigoted flotsam as it drifted past my mind's eye - the city administration often appeared. So now my freedom of expression is being stomped on by the local psychotics, who in their stupidity, think i am a leader, and in their own personal blind hallucinations have visualized me as having a following.

"With their cooperation i have been turned into a symbol, and i sincerely hope that in their incompetence they do not attempt to turn me into a martyr. This is absurd and i certainly don't want to be reborn into a world in which everyone is attempting to imitate a foul-mouthed saint. The city is working overtime to turn me into a myth, i haven't been able to reach them yet, perhaps you can - Think nice thoughts about them, perhaps they will grow into civilized human beings."

Just about two months later, on March 28th, 1967, levy was arrested at his apartment and charged with five counts of contributing to the delinquency of minors - specifically for reading so-called obscene poetry at The Gate in the presence of a 17-year-old boy who levy had published (a political poem praising the Hough riots of the previous summer), and a

15-year-old girl. The boy's parents had found a copy of the *Marrhswana Quarterly* in their son's room and complained to the police. The girl, once levy's friend, had agreed to carry a tape recorder into the reading and turn over the tape to the police.

In an article in *The Plain Dealer* two days later, Michael Roberts wrote:

Yesterday D. A. Levy, a poet, was in a large cell on the sixth floor of the county jail, complaining that poets should be treated more like political prisoners: They should have good books for the poets in cells. No poet in Cleveland's history has been treated like Levy, who the police say writes obscene poetry. He is to appear in Juvenile Court this morning for arraignment on a charge of reading teenagers his poetry and giving them books of it, thereby contributing to their delinquency on five counts.

"I write poetry with the intention of keeping people from smashing other people's heads," he said. "So they put me in a place with people who smash heads.

"Don't get me wrong. Some of these people in here are beautiful. Even the police were nice to me this time. Levy said when the police came to his apartment Tuesday afternoon they took his *Bomb Cleveland Not Hanoi* stickers, incense and the duplicating machine which is his pride.

Also arrested in his East Cleveland apartment were his friends Robert J. Sigmund, 18, also a poet, and John Scott, 24. Scott was later released. Sigmund, charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor, was being held in Municipal Jail. He wrote police a note on toilet paper, proclaiming a hunger strike. The document concluded: "please don't disrupt me with your questions if you see I am meditating . . ."

George J. Moscarino, assistant county prosecutor who will try Levy on the charge of publishing and dispensing obscene literature, said "This is a very, very serious charge. Our office has been interested in having a decent community for our children"

Some Western Reserve law professors and students plan to picket the Criminal Court Building today protesting the arrest. Conviction could carry a maximum penalty of five years in jail.

Levy sat in the cell musing over a statement one of the inmates had made: "How can people respect their elders when the elders do not respect themselves?"

Gerald Gold, who took over as levy's lawyer, recalled, "Of course d. a. was trying to get publicity. You have to remember, things were far more puritanical then - in fact - one of the exhibits we had for the trial, which never took place by the way, was a painting from the May Show at the Cleveland Art

Museum which had "FUCK" written in it. If it's the contemporary Standards in the Art Museum, why isn't it the Contemporary standard in the coffee houses?

"What had happened - you know d. a. never had any money, people were raising money to defend him - he was a scared, little worried guy, and we really had a deal where he didn't have to go to the can. He was scared to death of going to jail. Just scared to death of it. And you know, dealing in a Catholic-in-more-than-a-religious-sense community, we were kind of concerned that he was going to go to jail. So we finally made a deal, which in retrospect I'm sorry we made. Because I think as long as he had this fight he probably would have stayed alive. I think he just kinda got tired. He had nothing to live for, not love or hate, so he did himself in apparently.

"We always told him we thought we could win the case, but it was a case we could have lost too. You know, in Juvenile Court, it was and still is a pretty vague thing what is contributing to the delinquency of a minor. So that was the end of it - I don't think I ever saw him again."

On February 20, 1968, levy pled "no contest" to the charges of contributing to the delinquency of a minor, in return for probation and the dropping of the obscenity counts. He paid a \$200 fine and walked out a free man, but according to most of his friends, he was never the same again.

levy and his friends had always been considered justifiably paranoid - according to Dagmar, levy was followed, their apartment was secretly searched, and that at least one informer had infiltrated their inner group - identity unknown. And levy's friends, who from the start hadn't always been close to each other, drew even farther apart in their growing paranoia over who the informer was.

According to Franklin Osinski, "Cleveland had a Subversive Squad, going back to the McCarthy era. What they were doing mainly was breaking and entering and going through everybody's files. Today we can almost laugh about it, but back then it was like being under the thumb of the Nazis."

A law student then, Tony Walsh lived around the corner from levy. "East Cleveland," he explained, "was very diversified - mostly blacks down by Euclid, whites up in the hills in Forest Hills, which is divided by Forest Hills Park, a John D. Rockefeller estate. So when the Hough riots broke out levy was in the middle of it, trying to bring it together."

#### SUBURBAN MONASTERY DEATH POEM

Only 10 blocks away  
buildings burned - perhaps burning now  
the August night broken by sniper fire,  
Police men bleeding in the streets  
A sniper surrenders (perhaps out of ammunition)  
Gun jammed?  
some sed he was framed in a doorway  
like a picture - his hands in the air  
when they shot him -  
Only 10 blocks away  
from my quite apartment  
with its green ceramic Buddhas  
& science fiction books,  
unread skin magazines to be cut up  
for collages  
  
only 10 blocks away  
from my total helplessness  
from my boredom enforced by the state  
they are looting stores  
trying to get televisions  
so they can watch the riots  
on the 11 pm news

Kent Taylor recalled that levy told him he used to walk around the city "with a lethal dose of second" on him at all times.

When he managed to duck out of the chaos he had partly created, levy would disappear and crash at Jonathan Dworkin's house. "He'd come over for a night or a couple of days - for something to eat or some money for paper - he always left something in return - a picture, a poem, and then he went back to it.

"One day he told me 'There's no security in the universe,'" Steve Ferguson recalled. "When I replied, 'Oh?'" levy said, 'Well don't tell anybody I said that - if the wrong people hear it I'm in trouble.'"

Dagmar recalled, "sometimes he'd go off on a tangent for consciousness sake. He was a real manic-depressive - one minute he'd be up, the next he was down. He rarely ever lived in the middle. He seemed to like being up or down. He seemed to like being down as much as he liked being up. Ya know, he just liked having to say, 'I feel this and I feel this.' He wasn't able to appreciate nor did not care to appreciate any kind of a middle place where things are just OK. To him that wasn't good enough, things had to be very intense one way or the other. It had to be very good or bad, right or wrong. He didn't appreciate the subtle values in-between that I think life is all about. He felt uncomfortable unless he could label and place it. And basically he only had these two places he could put 'em.'"

"She lived with him, but she didn't really know him," says John Scott about the four year relationship that like almost everything else in levy's life was starting to fall apart.

Ed Sanders, among others, tried to get levy to come to Chicago for the 1968 Democratic Convention, but levy, though he supplied Sanders with a poem to be read, turned down the invitation. In a long soul wrenching letter to D. R. Wagner, at the end of that summer, he explained,

i said 'no' i wanted to go but inside i said 'no'  
and Mara (Dagmar) said 'please no' but she would  
let me do whatever i had to do - she is a 'good  
person' & she loves me & she is growing & we are  
sometimes very close - but' . . . me & mara.' . . . Will  
we grow into each other? i still want someone else -  
will she become someone else? perhaps i need two  
women? or 3? or none - i couldn't go to CHICAGO!

"so im stuck here til at least Dec- Jan most  
likely spring - & then? do i come to calif to die?  
to live? to grow? to rest? some good things could  
come together for me here & i don t want to make  
a wrong decision - i don't want to jump the gun - &  
despite what you may think - i am not hung up on  
cleveland & haven't been for a while - it is just that i  
am here & i can get things done here.

According to Osinski, besides everything else, politics was starting to take its toll on levy's poetry too, and on top of that he felt his angels' - the voices that guided him - had deserted him. This was not a metaphor.

"levy, Scott and I were driving to Toronto one time in the middle of a blizzard,' Wagner recalled. 'I think Cuz was there too. And levy turns and says to me [about the telepathy], 'You don't really believe this shit, do you? And I said, 'No, I don't'. He said, 'That's too bad, because you're the best transmitter of us all. Listen.' Then he and Scott proceeded to have a conversation, back and forth between themselves, without opening their mouths or saying a word, and I heard every word they were saying in my head.'"

That fall levy was invited to Madison, Wisconsin by Dave (not D.R.) Wagner and Morris Edelson, to be Poet in Residence at the new Free University. As Edelson described it, in the introduction to *The Madison Poets*, this "little, black-haired, pasty-faced, nervous intense fellow showed up in black pants, white socks, black shoes and one of those long-sleeved Hawaiian patterned shirts that recall the Greyhound Bus depot rather than the beach at Waikiki. He was coping with his Lenny Brucehood, having been busted for purveying porn to adolescents via his poems and newspaper and being generally harassed in Cleveland to the point of extreme nervous exhaustion . . . He visited my class, we set some poetry readings up for him, and we set up his Free University meeting room and place. I think the title of the class we said he would teach



was Tantric Yoga - no it was Telepathic Communication. His class was a tremendous success, though not because of his lecturing on telepathy. The first night he was supposed to teach it, we walked with him to the student union building. The room was on the first floor and was packed with people sitting quietly, intently, as though waiting for Jim Jones to pass the Kool-Aid. Either it was that or something else, something false, levy picked up on, and he simply walked on by the door and out the side. I thought for a moment of going in and telling them it was another no-show, but what the hell.

"We all walked over to the 602 Club and then thought no more about it, until Ann Krooth told me that levy's class was one of the most successful in all the Free University. People there assumed he was trying to reach them telepathically, and many of them heard him, as they sat there, meditating in the classroom. That class went on for several months after levy had returned to Cleveland - months after levy was no longer alive.

Many years later, trying to make sense of what happened, Dagmar remembered, "When he came back [from Madison] he got an invitation to be a poet in residence over there, and he also got an invitation to be a poet in residence at Athens too. And I don't understand whether it bummed him out or not. It seems he had gotten to where he had wanted to be, but then within 24 hours he was dead. I wasn't there, I don't know what happened, but it was certainly bizarre - he spent a lot of energy saying no one appreciated him, and then here people are saying come to our place, and he decides to do himself in.

"I had gotten to the point where I was really not happy with our relationship, and when he came back I wasn't living at our place anymore. People say that he said goodbye to them. I don't know what happened. If he committed suicide I certainly blame his friends as much as himself, because they thought it was so cool that he wanted to commit suicide - he talked about it all the time and they thought it was funny. I don't find anything funny about it. I couldn't understand why they thought that was so neat. I still don't understand what happened to this day."

As to whether she actually believes he committed suicide, her voice broke, "So it would seem! The police didn't investigate it that much. I don't know if it means it was a very obvious case of suicide or they didn't want to bother."

Though he has no evidence that would hold up in a court of law, Osinski told filmmaker Petrochuck, "My personal feeling based upon what I know is that levy was murdered. Another possibility was [levy] may have allowed himself to be murdered, realizing that he was not going to be permitted to leave [Cleveland]. There were quite a few people really

who did not want to see him leave. Like if you're a young child, and your father leaves, you'd be very upset. You want him to stay. And in a sense, when he talked of leaving Cleveland it was the same thing. Many of us did not want him to leave. It was kind of like having a loved one take off and leave and not come back for a long time, or not come back at all."

For years the rumor has circulated that levy was getting out of Cleveland, that he had made up his mind to go to California, get a job at the post office, move in with D.R. Wagner, and that he had sent Wagner a postcard letting him know he was on the way. He supposedly spent the last three or four weeks of his life methodically preparing to leave, although it wasn't clear where he was going. He gave a reading at Antioch, came back, deliberately picked a fight with Dagmar to drive her out, then after she was gone, went and got her, brought her back to the apartment, asked her to stay with him, and told her he realized his "poetry wasn't where it was at - it's just another game," and threw all his unpublished manuscripts in the incinerator. Dagmar, not knowing what to make of his behavior supposedly told him she'd be back, but didn't return. levy then went to his "tantric godmother" Jeanne Sonville's house, told her he was going out of town, offered her one of his two Siamese cats, and gave her some uncashed checks from advertising to publish a friend's book of prints. Then, as the story goes, he called his brother Jim and asked to borrow a suitcase. Then he called his parents. He wanted to speak to his father, but he wasn't in. According to his mother, levy, who thought he had a license but didn't drive, wanted his father to come pick him up. "I believe Darryl was thinking of coming home," the late Carolyn Levy told a reporter.

"My wife was the last person to see him alive," said Osinski, who six months before the death, moved into levy's building, catty-corner on the floor beneath him. Convinced more adamantly than ever that levy was murdered he explained to me, "There was a peculiar thing about levy's apartment, you would have had to have lived here to have known this. It was an older type of building, and it had the locks, the little buttons you had to push on the side of the door. He always had it pushed so it was unlocked. He always kept his door unlocked."

Hard to believe for someone so paranoid.

"Exactly!" Osinski proclaimed. "The thing is, I don't know if you've heard, in psychology, the person who's always talking about suicide is not the one that does it! It's the person who doesn't talk about it.

"levy was into what we call psychic violence - I remember I had an argument with him that was witnessed by rjs, and in that argument I warned

levy that psychic violence was dangerous, and if he continued it, in about six months or so he'd probably be dead. It was about nine months after that he was dead.

"The thing is he always left his door unlocked. Especially the last week or so he was alive, because I used to go up to his apartment. Of course, after he came back from Madison he wasn't seeing anybody - his old lady, Dagmar, split from him, but he still had the door unlocked . . . and that day he was taking care of things - in fact, he and my wife met at the A & P, 'cause he had gone to get some cat litter for his cats. And he helped my wife bring the groceries in - I was sound asleep because at the time I worked the night shift - I woke up kind of groggy, and there's my wife and there's levy bringing in the groceries, and he was happy! He looked happy. There was no way you would have suspected anything was going to happen. I was too groggy to talk to him, but I remember he talked about going to Africa."

The postcard to Wagner supposedly announcing levy's arrival in California was dated November 18, 1968. It has a picture of Meher Baba on the front, with the quotation, "I am the divine beloved who loves you more than you can ever love yourself." On the other side levy wrote: "d.r., cutting through the illusions i find i need the illusions to live grow, or is that another illusion? Help - reply necessary - short."

Sometimes levy thought of escaping to college, but everytime he got a scholarship form he ended up writing "FUCK" all over it. He said that once he was asked by a kid why he didn't go to college, and he told him, "they didn't have the courses I wanted. I told him I wanted to study angels."

from *TOMBSTONE AS A LONELY CHARM* (Part 3)

if you want a revolution  
return to your childhood  
and kick out the bottom

don't mistake changing  
headlines for changes

if you want freedom  
don't mistake circles  
for revolutions.

think in terms of living  
and know  
you are dying  
& wonder why.

if you want a revolution  
learn to grow in spirals  
always being able to return  
to your childhood  
and kick out the bottom.

This is what i've been  
trying to say - if you attack  
the structure -  
the system - the establishment  
you attack yourself  
KNOW THIS!  
& attack if you must  
challenge yourself externally  
but if you want a revolution  
return to your childhood  
& kick out the bottom.

be able to change  
your own internal chemistry

walk down the street  
& flash lights in yr head  
at children

With his angels apparently still not speaking to him, and the new found acceptance of his poetry leaving him both confident he was pulling it off, and depressed that it was all just a game, he decided to make his move. Whether that move was to actually leave Cleveland or someone stopped him from leaving is still a mystery over 25 years later.

Ferguson and Sigmund, who was generally thought to be the last person to see levy alive at the time, found the body Sunday night, November 25th. levy supposedly turned over the flats for the next issue of *The Oracle* to rjs, and he and Ferguson put it out.

"He was peaceful and beautiful", Sigmund said to the reporter at the wake. "He had more knowledge than anyone I ever knew. He said he thought of himself as three or four hundred years old and lived that way. Everybody does the same thing. It's all a game. Some people are remembered, some people are forgotten, at least he'll go out as a legend, like Hemingway."

After *The Oracle* came out, rjs, who had a very exclusive and intense relationship with levy, generally made himself unavailable for comment, and began severing all his contacts with d.a.'s other friends, building an aura of suspicion around himself that to this day still exists in the minds of many of the others.

Ed Sanders didn't know what it was, but he felt there was something wrong. He and the Fugs were on tour, on the way to Notre Dame, when the gig got canceled. When he got to Cleveland he had the strange feeling that something was being covered up. Something that to this day he can't put his finger on.

Steve Ferguson, who thinks of himself in biblical terms as "a simple shepherd," pauses, then says, "People have said to me that it's guys like you who drove levy crazy. But you can't be held responsible

for what you don't know!

"I used to say 'sure' to almost everything," he recalled, so when rj called and said he was worried about levy and wanted me to go over with him, I said 'sure.' I think he wanted somebody else along, perhaps he had a premonition that something was seriously wrong and he didn't want to take the trip alone.

"I don't know where I was living in those days - levy and rj were within a block of each other. So we went over and tried to push in, but the door was locked - it was necessary to get the lady who did the cleaning to open the door. Which she did - swung it open, and he was there in the first room.

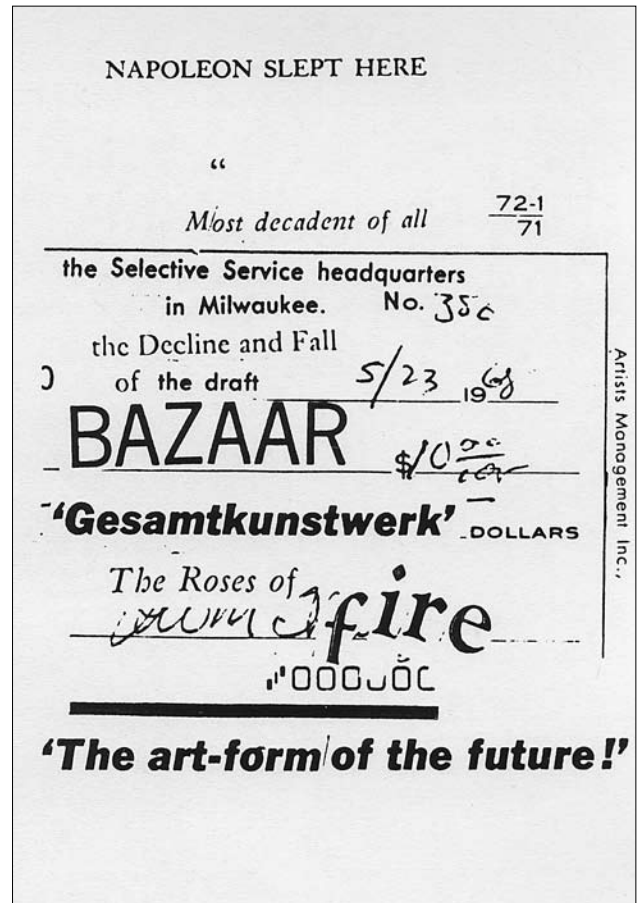
"I reconstructed the lotus theory myself - one foot was back under the bend behind the other knee, the other one had dropped down to the floor. The knees were both forward, it was a full lotus that had broken as the body fell backwards. The rifle was still propped up in between the legs. The police were not content with their investigation and they kept fiddling with theories. One of the unusual things they noted was there was no tension in the muscles. In a suicide case there is always tension in the muscles anticipating the impact of the bullet. The other thing was the angle of the entry of the bullet, which came from above. These are things I heard - I never had my hands on any of the documents.

"They were trying to speculate how he with his short arms could haul a .22 rifle up into that position. It seemed perfectly obvious to me that he sat on the edge of the mattress, leaned over the rifle and pulled the trigger. There was a splatter of blood on the wall behind him where the body had pitched backwards and flipped that splatter back there. Because it was a .22 - there wasn't much else. A small clean hole right in the third eye . . . which is black poetry, thank you very much.

"The police of course have their own methods of dealing with things - one cop said, 'Aw, this is nothing, we had a guy who blew his head off with a shotgun last week.'"

For the next several years, he's not sure how long, Ferguson kept *The Oracle* running sporadically. "I wasn't literally equipped at the time. I just felt I had to do something. Later, I figured out there's a kind of complicit feeling when somebody commits suicide. You feel responsible, like it was your fault 'cause you didn't know, or you weren't there. Later on I experienced a lot of the things I'm sure that levy was experiencing, and developed a better understanding of it. I had my own series of religious visions, I went through my own very long period of carefully chemically, psychologically balancing myself. And that, really in the last few years, was a lot of what levy was doing - he had this paranoid

JAB



d.a. levy, "NAPOLEON SLEPT HERE", mid 1960s

internal balance that he was keeping - which is man's relationship with God kinda thing. The suicide story sits with me because fundamentally we're talking about a pretty unforgiving personality - he had written a lot of stuff he wasn't that pleased with anymore, but he was so committed to making himself a poet he was unable in himself to go back and tear it up and throw it away. He was committed to taking every word as gospel, and that could catch up with him, especially if he was starting to get the recognition. I've never gone this far with it before," Ferguson suddenly realized. "I may regret I ever said this, but look, he was a pretty vain guy. Perhaps it was his feeling that ultimately the most dramatic thing he could do would be to split right now, while the mythology was at its peak - before he got sold off and the chicken salad dinners started rolling in. He was a master of impact, I have to grant that. There was a lot of confusion, ya know, there was confusion about what exact role Dagmar had and what exactly he owed her - common-law wife, companion, partner, girlfriend, whatever . . . He actually wrote the list down a few times - he didn't know exactly what to think of her or what his relationship should or would be with her, and it tore his heart out that he couldn't provide better for her, but part of that

was a dominance game too - if he had had money he wouldn't have had to take a lot of shit from her either.

"She was not the easiest woman to be around, she was inclined toward depression and moping around the house and not much talking to anybody - I think she was just another person trying to work her stuff out, and levy was there, and between supporting him and not supporting him she couldn't find much of a value one way or another, so she supported him. She wasn't happy where she was. . .

"A week and a half before he killed himself she moved off to live with this real screwball - the guy that did the eyeball paintings. The paintings were awful - eyeballs perched on these walls in space - 20 or 30 eyeballs per painting - he had a wife that he called Mouse, and a series of sado-masochistic steps to enlightenment that he ran her through.

"Dewey Fagenberg and I went over and tried to spring [Dagmar] from the joint, but she allowed that that was where she wanted to be. '

"Of course levy had just come back from Madison - it had a big effect on him being up there because enough people were finally treating him seriously as a poet to gratify some of those tremendous drives, which were perhaps the most profound part of his personality. He was dead serious about it. He wanted to be a poet and goddamit he was going to be a poet - he willed himself to be a poet.

"He didn't do anything mechanical - wouldn't take a job around machines. Avoided most jobs anyway because they conflicted with what it was he wanted to be doing.

"There have been dark rumors about his relationship with rj - speculations about the egocentric game playing, back and forth, that they did. I never witnessed them but I heard some pretty graphic stories - holding knives to one another's throats, stuff like that. It was all about love, death and poetry.

"I grant you that rj's behavior in calling me [to go to levy's] is a bit suspicious - I've been asked about that before, and . . . I don't put . . . He was a pretty crazy guy himself - another of these people who carried with himself a conviction of his own genius and his destiny. He was driven to the point where he couldn't stand correction - couldn't stand criticism - he couldn't entertain another point of view: *Be reasonable, see it my way!*

"You know the line from Ecclesiastes, 'Vanity, vanity, all is vanity'? Almost everybody forgets the last line of that passage: 'All is vanity and vexation of spirit,' so says the preacher. If you wanted to cast these two in a morality play, levy could play vanity, and rj could play vexation of spirit.

"As for the darker theories with rj - I think that was just the way it looked emotionally to a lot of

people. rj's relationship with levy was certainly trying for them both. They ran into each other and they were certainly equal opposites of some sort or another. I think that was clear to everybody around them. It's the kind of thing where you say, 'Oh no, this isn't going to work.'

"I think it's possible nothing physical happened between them. I think it's equally possible that the suicide happened in rjs' presence - that he locked up the room and came back two or three days later with a witness. And I think it is unlikely that in our lifetime anybody's going to know for sure unless rj tells us. And I sincerely doubt rj is going to say anything. Jim Lowell is a chatterbox in comparison.

Robert J. Sigmund, better known as rjs [or rj] first met d.a. Levy in the fall of '65 at Cleveland State, where he was running a coffee house and a newspaper, and in his own words, "Was kinda being the local radical there." In the last several years of levy's life he was closer to the poet than anyone else, and collected and edited the most complete work on levy, *ukanhavryfuckincitiback*, which was published by T. L. Kryss in a limited edition of 1000 copies. Concluding a monumental five page introduction to that book, rj wrote:

"maybe this book is here to fuck with levy the same way the early christians fucked with christ. create a mythology around d.a. & kill him with his own words so he can't be human anymore. that's kinda mean, u mite believe me. why else would've i used that analogy? why else would such a book appear?"

Two months before his death, levy questioned the relationship in a letter to D.R. Wagner:

"rjs thinks i am telling him to commit suicide when i tell him to go after the light! am i? i don't think so - the ego dies slowly - a little on each level of consciousness - poet or prophet. artist or saint. all the same - but i wanted to be a saint & a magician & be invisible & do good things turn people on - & this country is not the place to be a prophet! too much death & wanting death subconsciously - too much misdirected energy while the city sleeps & pretends . . ."

Surprisingly, rjs, who lives in the country outside Cleveland and spends most of his time working an acre and a half garden, was willing, though somewhat hesitant in the beginning to talk about his relationship with levy. "Whatta ya wanna know? How close were we? We were like partners in a business - I lived 200 feet away from his building - we had breakfast together every morning, that's roughly how close we were.

"To me he seemed to be telegraphing what he was going to do all along, but we were missing it. It



was an amazing stunt, that's what I felt. and it rang like a bell afterwards, that's all I can say.

"Why'd he do it? Was he incapable of getting out of Cleveland?"

"He left Cleveland! That was the whole point, he left Cleveland. That was the whole point, leaving Cleveland. He left. He went to Israel. Get it?"

After a long pause he says, "I was engaged in a lot of mundane activities and I wasn't paying attention to what he was saying. He was saying those things and I did not connect - he would talk in terms of 'if we both pulled our energy out of Cleveland the whole thing would collapse' - that is the whole thing in the sense of whatever network was in Cleveland at the time. The community. There was a community in East Cleveland which was somewhat more subdued - a greaser-beatnik background, more intellectual. There was the hippie community in Cleveland Heights, which we weren't really into. We had something different happening. What we had going was more like covens in East Cleveland.

"Of course, I'm long since burned out . . . And like Tom Kryss said - he didn't say it in these words - I'm trying to paraphrase, 'all the bullshit in the world isn't gonna raise his eyebrows again.' Read the introduction to *Suburban Monastery Death Poem*: the existential games we play to make ourselves do something real. Whereas what does it all mean after the maggots have eaten our corpse, or what does it mean after you have taken that last stop, once you've left Cleveland, once you've gone to Israel, what do all these games we're playing on this level mean? It's an existential enlightenment.

"I have always been, from the age of 17, into existentialism - I'd cut my teeth on Sartre, Camus and that gang. It never crystallized itself until the way it was then, and probably continues to do so now in a different way. Of course, over a period of 20 years you lose a lot of what you had then too. My outlook did become more . . . I stopped fooling myself almost completely for awhile there.

"Ya know, there's a biological imperative that forces you to continue building games to fool yourself, because if you continue, if you continue to live, your biology overcomes your intellectual understanding of reality. If you are alive, the biological imperative that keeps you alive is going to create games that will gradually pull your eyes shut ok. Does that make sense?"

"I can't really place [the last conversation with d. a.] in time. It was either two nights before or three nights before we discovered his body. There was kind of an instinct after he hadn't been around for awhile and his cousin and Kent Taylor dropped off a suitcase at my apartment because levy hadn't answered his door and he's leaving Cleveland

and wants the suitcase. And all those things come together for me at that point in time. I got hold of Steve Ferguson - without saying it in words there was some kind of concurrence between Steve Ferguson and myself that levy was dead.

"And we went over to his apartment and asked his landlady for the keys - we believed we were going to find his body. We knew at that point, at last that's my recollection of it - I didn't want to go myself - there was something to me that was frightening about going myself and finding his body - and his landlady screamed!

"The strangest thing that happened to me was that I happened to be carrying a pocket knife or something - the police come and I think they're gonna search me for weapons - I don't know, there's this paranoia that sets in when the police are around. . .

"The last conversation . . . I don't know . . . He kept dragging me through the same kind of existential philosophical conversation that we had had several times over nothing meaning anything at all and all of that I didn't have an answer for it - its all meaningless so where do you go from here - and I would sit there dumbfounded like a dummy. Whatta ya mean where do we go from here? He was trying to communicate to me, ok, *this is all bullshit, it's all meaningless and it's a pain in the butt. I mean, it's no fun being here*, that kind of thing. *We're miserable being alive. And it doesn't have any meaning - anything you accomplish is just a game you're playing to fool yourself. So where do we go from here?* That was our last conversation, in the best way I can describe it.

"It ran maybe six hours, it ran very long into the night, into the next morning. He kept coming to me and I couldn't answer him. It wasn't clear to me. I was doing stupid things like painting my apartment, those kind of things, ya know. The day I was over there I was borrowing painting equipment, a scraper, stupid things like that. Ya know, here I was operating on that level at the time - I had fallen off the high ground and I was down operating on the planet, and he was planning on leaving. Like I said, I hadn't realized how far away he was because I was too dense to see it. If you're dense someone can be way ahead of you and you never realize they're way ahead of you. I mean, when somebody's way ahead of you you only see as far ahead of you as you are capable of seeing. You can't see how much farther they may well be in front of you because you're not there.

"levy was kinda my mentor, and I would usually sit behind in the background and not say much of anything. levy would introduce me and I would just kind of keep to myself and listen and then after-

wards levy would go over what he thought had happened, and I would contribute - I was kind of the shadow that was out of the picture that would supply additional information to d.a. as to what I thought was going down, if that makes any sense. All I can say is it's been 20 years, and I sure as hell have been through a lot of things that haven't any relationship to the level I reached in those times - I mean, I've done everything from fighting the utilities company to playing the demagogue for the local citizens of the area. The most recent thing I wrote was on the effects of the drought in China on the U.S. and world food supply.

"There ya go again," he laughs. "You go through all kinds of things and I know what that means. I'm playing the same games that are keeping me away from the enlightened . . . The lights are all out, OK. And you can't turn the lights on without approaching that same decision [levy made] - you have to get near that edge, you have to go on that cutting edge to begin to have any kind of light, you have to be on the point of the sword ready to fall before the real lights come on, and if you're not there, then you don't see it. You know, you see past it. It's the Analogy of the Cave, the Aristotle [sic] thing, where you're looking at the shadows on the wall, and you're one of the people sitting there seeing the shadows on the wall. And how can somebody who understands you're looking at shadows on the wall communicate to the people who only see the shadows on the wall that it is the fire behind them and they are here in the room, and the shadows are just a reflection?"

Twenty years after his death, in the fall of 1988, a three day festival celebrating his life and work was held in Cleveland at Case Western Reserve University.

Over twenty five years ago, this letter circulated all over underground America, the day after his body was found.

LETTER TO THOSE WHO HAVEN'T HEARD:

D.A. LEVY IS DEAD 11.26.68

morgan came over about 12:30 last nite & told clarissa to wake me up. when i came downstairs he told me rjs had just called from cleveland. i have bad news/d a.'s committed suicide/levy's dead/ blew his brains out with a shotgun/d.a.'s dead/ died blew himself apart/dead/he's dead i don't understand what it all means. i go back to d a.'s letters & try to find him/bring him back somehow . . . he wrote me the day before he died - it was a 3 page thing - the longest he's ever written to me:

*"if you don't hear from me for a while its ok since time is non existent (that's what my angels tell me when i get impatient)*

*til dec 1*

*only - maybe"*

"i keep trying to find out what it all means/what i'm supposed to do. & like maybe it wasn't the police chief briers & richard nixon that killed d.a. maybe it was you & i who pushed him in to dying. maybe if we had all just left him alone/stopped pushing him & writing him/telling him its all worth it/all the shit is really worth it in the end/maybe if we had just gotten off his fucking back for once & given him room to live HE DIED BECAUSE HE WAS TIRED. because i don't understand all this. because this morning i received books from d.a. that had been mailed the nite before he died. because i can't cry anymore over a package from a dead man. because i loved him even before he died. because he's dead & i don't understand what it means . . . there have been only 2 people i've cried for in my life: my grandfather & levy. i don't think i'll ever cry again. stay well, motherfucker, law & order is back in Cleveland. & d.a. levy is dead."

Jim Sorcic, Gunrunner Press

*THE BELLS OF CHEROKEE PONIES*

i thought they were  
wind chimes  
in the streets at night  
  
with my young eyes  
i looked to the east  
and the distant ringing  
of ghost ponies  
rose from the ground

Ponies Ponies Ponies

(the young horse becomes  
a funny sounding word)

i looked to the east  
seeking buddhas to  
justify those bells  
weeping in the darkness

Cherokee, Delaware Huron  
we will return your land to you

to purify the land  
with their tears

to tell their fathers

"in the streets at night  
the bells of Cherokee ponies  
are weeping."

- d.a. levy

In 1988, while I was writing an article on levy to be published in the premier issue of *New York Writer* there was an incredibly diverse response from everyone I interviewed. Some like Frank Osinski kept insisting levy was murdered by one particular

member of the inner circle. Others kept insisting it had definitely been the Subversive Squad. Others claimed he did it because Dagmar was sexually involved with one or more of his closest friends. And even others claimed levy had been tripping for close to two weeks before the fatal day he made his decision.

At one point, while Ed Sanders and I were both in Cleveland for the 20th anniversary festival celebrating levy's life and work at Case Western University, Osinski called from Northern California, demanding that a kangaroo court be held to settle things once and for all. Charges and counter charges were hurled back and forth, but that was as far as it went.

When the article came out, the reaction was fairly positive from most of the people who knew levy, though neither rjs or Steve Ferguson were very happy with the way they came off. Neither, however, complained that they had been misquoted.

In 1990 I met a musician from Cleveland named Tim Wright, who once upon a time had a band called *Pere Ubu*. Wright had read the article on levy, but had made no effort to contact me until we were introduced by a mutual friend. Like a postmodern Stan Laurel imitating W. C. Fields, his first words to me were, "Are you ready for some brand new lies?"

Wright told me that not long after levy's death Ferguson and Dagmar got married. Ferguson, who had been one of the major sources on the article, never mentioned that bit of critical information. But the news of the marriage wasn't the end of Wright's surprises. "There are a lot of salacious rumors about what happened," he said, "but about six months after they got married Ferguson supposedly went to San Francisco and did a lot of acid with the [*Jefferson*] *Airplane*. When he came back he was fried, and when his head didn't clear Dagmar had him committed and they gave him electroshock." Wright drove Ferguson to the hospital, and "tried to talk him out of doing it, to Dagmar's dismay." He even went back to the hospital by himself and brought Ferguson some R.D. Laing books and tried to talk him out of it again, but failed.

What's the truth? There are too many different sides to the story, too many different people pointing their fingers at each other. At this point, even if someone claims they were in the room with levy when he died, the only truth we can be sure of is the truth that lives in levy's work, because basically as Ferguson said, "it was all about love, death and poetry."

—end

Over the years this portrait of d.a. levy has appeared in slightly different forms in *New York Writer*, *Beet* and *Atom Mind*, and in 1990 was the recipient of a grant from The

National Endowment For The Arts, for narrative film development. The full text will be published in spring, 1999 by Seven Stories Press.

The editor & publisher of *Smoke Signals* and the now defunct *SoHo Arts Weekly* Mike Golden is a poet-painter, novelist, journalist, and award winning playwright & screenwriter, whose writing has appeared in, among other places, *Film Comment*, *Rolling Stone*, *Between* and numerous lit rags, mens' mags and underground zines.

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PO Box 20531  
New York, NY 10011

## NOSTALGIA FOR RELEVANCE

BY GARY SULLIVAN

"what can be more obscene than refusing to communicate?"

- d.a. levy

Has art in the United States had any significant cultural relevance since, like, the 60s? Where, outside an arts-funding context, is there any serious, passionate public discussion of the arts? Some of our most famous recent artists—Serrano, Sprinkle, Mapplethorpe—are famous not because their artwork is necessarily subversive or relevant, and certainly not because it tests the boundaries of what art is or might be, but because certain politicians have used their work in an effort to, among other things (including political gain), distract national attention from expanded government subsidy of multinational corporations. Truly politically engaged artists—Kathy Acker, Amiri Baraka, Coco Fusco, Barbara Hammer, Edgar Heap of Birds—are rarely, if ever, made a part of the national discourse.

I have the sense, and I should emphasize that word "sense", that artists working in this country in the 50s and 60s, and maybe even as late as the 70s, mattered, generally, in a much more politically and socially relevant way than those of us working in their wake. The Beats, Dick Gregory, Shirley Clarke... compare Aram Saroyan's one-word poems "exposed" as "frauds" on the national news to the public discourse surrounding, say, Karen Finley smearing her buttocks with canned yams. No one, so far as I know, ever seriously questioned her art as art. Howard Stern may raise eyebrows, but unlike Lenny Bruce, whose last performances flew in the face of audience expectations of "stand-up" comedy, Stern doesn't raise questions about the essential nature of what he does. If the Firesign Theater helped validate counterculture values and ideology to a mainstream, largely college-educated, audience, the Simpsons validate mainstream values and ideology to an increasingly fragmented counterculture. Liz Phair's name appears on the cover of *Newsweek* not when *Exile in Guyville*, her song-for-song feminist rehash of the Rolling Stones's *Exile on Main Street*, became a minor hit, but years later, once she became a wife and a mother and her anger, her wit, mellowed into something more generally palatable.

It's amazing to realize that poet, publisher and agit-prop artist d.a. levy's death at the age of 26, by apparent suicide, made the *New York Times* in 1968. This would be inconceivable today. levy self-published by letterpress and mimeograph nearly everything he wrote in editions of 100-200 copies. He worked a "real job" for only one month of his

admittedly truncated adult life. Besides a brief stint in the Navy (he was discharged for manic depression), he only left his native Cleveland once or twice. The bulk of his time was spent reading and writing poetry, publishing more than 100 books and magazines (including bpNichol's first book and chapbooks by Paul Blackburn, Charles Bukowski, Ed Sanders and a handful of others), and running a number of reading series in Cleveland's then burgeoning cafe scene. His "career," such as it was, lasted a mere six years. If there was a more intensely prolific and publicly engaged poet/publisher in the U.S. before or since, his or her work is now even more ephemeral than levy's.

Very little writing exists on levy, but of that which does, the most brilliant comes to us from Ingrid Swanberg, who also edited the posthumous *Zen Concrete & Etc.* In the catalogue accompanying Colorado University Art Galleries's "American Renegades" show, which featured work by Kenneth Patchen, d.a.levy and D.R. Wagner, Swanberg writes:

Webster's defines "renegade" as a deserter from one faith, cause or allegiance to another; the Standard Dictionary defines it as apostate, traitor, deserter. I would like to ask: allegiance to what? (Of course, the meaning "renegade" has taken on, under the spell of American romanticism, is a suggestion of outlaw or anarchist.) The Medieval Latin *renegatus* means "to deny," and is the source of the English "renig," which means "to break one's word." But what, exactly, is the poet's obligation to the community, the poet's word? levy reduced the word to silence. He broke-up, cut-up, shattered, fragmented, pulverized the word in concrete poems, his silence erupting against the death carried by the word and the death carried by the image, as if to throw everything thinkable into disruption, in the tradition of Baudelaire, Rimbaud...

Swanberg's interest in levy's art is to great extent focused on what she feels to have been levy's examination and questioning of the poet's role or status in "the urban-industrial-technological epoch." Already at the age of 19, levy wrote of "the nothingness of being a poet in america" but, Swanberg argues, was someone who "despite the overwhelming trauma the city bestows... reclaims creative power over it... claims authorship, though he has nothing in particular to say beyond this saying which is the poet's being." Swanberg connects levy's claim to authorship and creative power with his interest in Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, making a convincing argument that "the Buddhist doctrine of consciousness as the formative force in the transformation of matter is of key importance in understanding [levy's] work." This sounds right, especially given that levy's most



radical language-art experiments, the “destructive writing” series, were titled *Zen Concrete* and *The Tibetan Stroboscope*. Both books include lines of type smeared beyond readability, foregrounding not merely the materiality of language, but its earthly status as a kind of ultimately empty physical gesture. Whether the story language tells us is “alethia” or the lie of illusion becomes a crucial consideration in any reading of levy’s work via a Zen or Tibetan Buddhist filter. But there is at least one other filter through which to read levy’s “destructive writing” series.

Like Bruce, d.a. levy was at war, very seriously at war, with the authorities. In 1967 the City of Cleveland arrested levy twice, ordered the police to raid and shut down his friend Jim Lowell’s Asphodel Bookshop, and closed down several of the coffee houses where levy and his contemporaries gathered to read and listen to poetry. And, though the stated reason in each case was “obscenity,” the real reason was that, by early ‘67, the counter-culture in Cleveland was beginning to make itself felt as a significant presence and site of resistance to local authority. levy was, during the last two years of his life, a watched man, as well as a wanted man. What he did, and what the City of Cleveland did to him, made headlines. Allen Ginsberg flew out to voice his support when levy was busted the second time. levy’s anger with the larger culture—made manifest from his earliest writings on—funneled, very easily, into specific anger directed at the City of Cleveland. Without discounting the obvious Buddhist influence of levy’s “destructive writing” series, it can also be read as a symbolic attempt to destroy the very basis of the city in which he lived: written language. For what is a city, from what basis does it take its particular shape, if not its laws? Polis, going as far back as Sumer, is, essentially, bureaucracy.

In the “Para-Concrete Manifesto,” written in 1966 before he began his “destructive writing” series, levy wrote:

“We will give you art suitable only to be used as toilet paper & hung in your porcelain-marble-glass outhouses... Our concrete poems are written to purify our minds and intestines of all western sophisticated hypocrisy apathetic impotent outrageous racist mindfucking white supremacy dung/to liberate ourselves from the decay of the passive dainty assfuck culture of art patrons/to save ourselves from being enshrined with the other martyrs & heros of The Muck Suck as Jesus, Nixon, the pope, president Johnson, Billy Grahamcrackers, the American ‘deep image’ poets, Dali, Wyeth, Walt Disney, & the princes of distortion (the newspaper reporters) . . . Our concrete poems are Shit/each poem a tiny spat of diarrrrrrrhea growing into infinite globules of cement excrement/our concrete poems are beyond concrete

poems/Where DaDaim failed, preaching Anti-Art but creating art & the NaDaists failed by creating an art of nothingness when they proclaimed NOTHING - the cleveland cement fuckers will succeed in giving the public SHIT. . . . each poem - a ray of light blotted out like a turd sinking into the abysmal waters of the mass-mindlessness. . . . each poem - a ting of nourishment for the sages of extinction . . . each poem - a death of WORDS AS ART.”

Anyone can decry, create and successfully promote bad art: Jeff Koons alone has proven that much. But levy’s project, such as it was, was as infinitely more socially relevant than Koons’s, and at least as frightening as, say, Artaud’s. levy’s experiments in “destructive writing” are as beautiful as they are shit-muddy—beautiful, I think, because this is where creative writing, in conflict with the City, had to go. Thirty years before Charles Bernstein’s treatise-poem on “anti-absorption,” levy gave us the ultimate anti-absorptive poem: lines of type smeared beyond readability—readable as an effort or gesture toward language, but not, in the strictest sense of the word, “readable.” It wasn’t an aesthetic game. The authorities were fucking up his life, hounding him day & night, and where, as an artist, do you strike back if not through your work? Especially if you know the authorities are taking notice of it.

November 24 of this year will mark the 30th anniversary of d.a. levy’s death, and though no longer part of the mainstream or avant-garde poetry-world discourse, levy’s work hasn’t been altogether forgotten. In addition to Swanberg’s *Zen Concrete & Etc.*, another, even larger, collection of levy’s work is rumored to be published later this year. A biographical film, *if i scratch, if i write*, was completed by Kon Petrochuck in 1982, and is still screened, if only on occasion. A number of levy’s poems and experiments in “destructive writing” are now on-line: (<http://www.thing.net/~grist/1&d/dalevy/dalevy.htm>) thanks to Swanberg, Karl Young and Karl Kempton. New York poet David Kirschenbaum gave a talk on levy’s writing at a symposium of “alternative poetry” held in Boston this past July, and Kirschenbaum is currently putting together a conference on levy’s writing. [See page 17 for details.] There would seem to be, since levy’s death three decades ago, increasing awareness and interest in his life and art. But that’s only because we’ve forgotten how present, and how crucial his presence was, then.

—end

Gary Sullivan is a poet and writer living in Brooklyn, NY and is the publisher of Detour Press.

## THE TIBETAN STROBOSCOPE OF d.a. levy

BY STEVE CLAY

1963 was a great year in the American art/literary underground. The Vancouver Poetry Conference was held that summer, and those in attendance included such poets Margaret Avison, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, Charles Olson, and Philip Whalen. It was the first major gathering of many of the poets included in Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*. In the same year, *City Lights* published Ed Sanders's *Poem from Jail*; and Ted Berrigan began "C", his great mimeo magazine and press, while Ed Dorn launched *Wild Dog*, another of the defining magazines of the nascent mimeo revolution. 1963 also saw the publication of La Monte Young's *AN ANTHOLOGY OF chance operations concept art anti-art INDETERMINANCY IMPROVISATION meaningless work natural disasters plans of action STORIES Diagrams POETRY ESSAYS Music Dance constructions mathematics COMPOSITIONS*, not to mention Ed Ruscha's *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations*.

It is doubtful that d.a. levy would have been particularly aware of much of this activity, but it is a remarkable coincidence that his short and furious writing career would begin in such an auspicious year. In 1963 levy printed and published his first book of poetry, *Variations on Flip*, (Renegade Press, Cleveland). He was 21 years old and printed the book on a used hand press found for him by his brother. levy was a poet/printer/publisher solidly in the tradition of William Blake and, as Eric Mottram notes, "His poetry is part of that millennialist [sic] poetry . . . concerned with bringing about change through revelation, through prophecy rather than revolution." (*The Serif*, December 1971, p. 5.) levy's lyric writing circulated throughout the literary underground, appearing in small magazines and in books and pamphlets issued from the likes of *blewointment*, *Runcible Spoon*, *grOnk and Ayizan*, as well as from one of his own book and magazine imprints, *Renegade*, *7 Flowers*, *The Silver Cesspool*, *The Marrahwannah Quarterly*, and *The Buddhist Third Class Junkmail Oracle*, among many others. Although well-known to the cognoscenti, levy's work never reached much beyond the privately circulated publications of the small press revolution. The writing doesn't appear in any of the "major" anthologies of the period, and his visual work escaped publication in the primary collections of concrete & visual poetry.

In addition to his decidedly lyrical "millennialist" writing, levy also created his own brand of visual poetry - one that incorporates collage with a paint-

erly use of the printing press. One such book, *The Tibetan Stroboscope*, is described in a cover note by levy as "an experiment in destructive writing 'other' communications and 'concrete' prose." *The Tibetan Stroboscope* is crudely printed via offset on newsprint with a single saddle-stitched signature. One sees several subtle influences here, in particular, the use of compositional procedures and strategies directed toward minimizing, if not entirely circumventing the ego of the writer. These include the use of chance operations and indeterminacy (as seen in the work of John Cage, Jackson Mac Low, and others), "dictation"- as if the poet were a radio, tuned to the broadcast of the poem-his job one of mere transcription (Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan are good examples of this approach - in practical terms this isn't too far removed from Allen Ginsberg's Buddhist-inspired writing motto "first thought, best thought"); and an evocation of "the third mind" as revealed through the cutup and collage techniques espoused by William Burroughs and Brion Gysin (with an ambition to "rub out the word"). One also feels the presence of Tom Phillips. His seminal book, *A Humument* was begun in London in 1966 and was a conscious extension of Burroughs's cut-up methodology. Phillips wrote through W. H. Mallock's Victorian novel *A Human Document* [late 19th century], painting over words, lines, and pages and in the process revealing and creating a new text (one very much verbal and visual) out of Mallock's original.

One senses an abundance of youthful anger, rebellion, sexuality and irony in levy's work, but at the same time it is clearly dead serious. *The Tibetan Stroboscope* is dedicated to Allen Ginsberg, Alan Watts, Robert Aitken, Phillip Kapleau, Paul Reps and Philip Whalen - all Buddhists. From my point of view as a publisher and reader it is hard to imagine a more perfect book. I suspect that it could only have been made by a seeker and an outsider. It is sophisticated, but in the way of the homemade-one can sense a kind of desperation to communicate here: It seems as if every aspect of this work is imbued with meaning and significance-from the copyright page note, "all copyrot rejected by author" to the final statement on the back page, "piece/peace & awareness." From a ground of obliterated text, which plays the role of a wall of white noise, erupts a barrage of verbal and visual images centered primarily around the lower chakaras but aiming for the great hereafter: erotic, tantric, ecstatic, ironic, angry, rebellious-sex, death, and enlightenment. One reads, "what the hell is going on?", "hail to the lord of speech", "be gone forces of darkness" "no matter where you go your head goes." These texts are dripping with meaning (and make no attempt to tidy up the pro-

cess of creating meaning), particularly in hindsight: *The Tibetan Stroboscope* was to be one of levy's last works. It was published in 1968, the year of his death, an apparent suicide at age 26.

In January of 1967, levy was arrested, along with Jim Lowell of the Asphodel Bookshop, on charges of possession and distribution of obscene literature. These charges stemmed from levy's having read "obscene" poems to high school students at a church-sponsored coffeehouse. Basically, the Cleveland elders were out to get him. He was martyred by the authorities and turned into a cult figure by nearly everyone else. The poetry community at large gathered in his support. Allen Ginsberg, The Fugs and others performed a benefit to raise money for legal fees while local friends produced the anthology *ukanhavyrfuckincitibak* to help raise funds. Eventually the charges were dropped. By then, however, the damage was done. Levy never fully recovered from the experience. In November 1968, his body was found by friends. He had a bullet hole in the middle of his forehead - a .22 rifle was next to his body.

Like a crazy Roman candle over the rotten Cuyahoga river (in the words of Randy Newman, "burn on big river, burn on"), levy produced well over 150 books, pamphlets and magazines within the three years of his printing and publishing life. These works are all long out-of-print and not easily available even on the rare book market. Ingrid Swanberg and the Ghost Pony Press have published an excellent collection of levy's work called *Zen Concrete & etc.* As well as a useful survey of his writing, this book also includes an insightful preface by Swanberg and several interviews with and memoirs by people who knew this remarkable artist. *Zen Concrete & etc.* is the best way into levy's work. It is available from the publisher (Ghost Pony Press, 2518 Gregory Street, Madison, WI 53711) and from James Lowell at Asphodel Books (17192 Ravenna Road, Rte 44, Burton, OH 44021.)

—end

Steve Clay publishes Granary Books in New York City.

# LAST DYNASTY NOTES

## Interior Travel

*T' Metropol of the Blue Poppy-*  
The rack botanist.

## Temples and

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Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Enrique Chagoya, Felicia Rice, *Codex Espangliensis*, 1998, Santa Cruz, Moving Parts Press

**CODEx ESPANGLIENSIS**  
 REVIEWED BY EMILY McVARISH

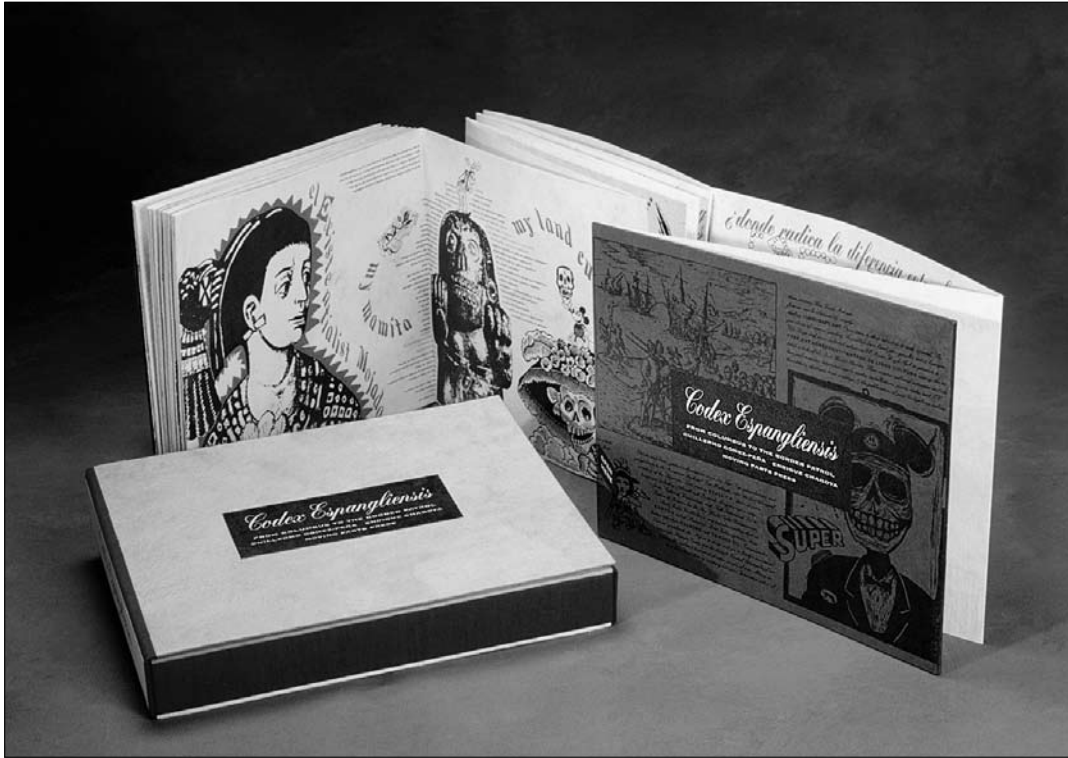
*Codex Espangliensis* comes in a box, its black cloth sides as broad as a border of mourning. Black ink forms a block around the title and the words below it: "FROM COLUMBUS TO THE BORDER PATROL GUILLERMO GÓMEZ-PEÑA ENRIQUE CHAGOYA MOVING PARTS PRESS" On the front cover of *Codex*, behind the wall of red ink, we find the first hints of the dark humor that pervades the book—Disney's Goofy standing stupidly atop an Aztec monument, Mickey laughing on a skeleton's hat. On a tab, "Open Here", is helpfully written.

Beginning with the opening panel, there is much to behold: European and Aztec imagery, the meeting (or at least juxtaposition) of two complete worlds, commentary in the form of collage and superimposition, a question in red script along the top edge is translated in black caps along the bottom. Superman, his trademark "S" replaced by a roughly drawn skull on his chest and his solid red shape dominating the page, seems to bid us "forward" as he points to the next fold.

This next spread is jammed with print. Large red script, says "A Brief History" in the upper left corner and "Pregunta" in the right. Small black script fills every space between the blocks of illustration. The styles, sources, and references of the staggered images have multiplied: the fine-line engraving of a dollar-bill George Washington has come to occupy the center of a kneeling circle of hand-drawn peas-

ants; Mickey's hat is now worn by a scratchy, lino-cut skeleton, the bold, 3-D lettering of Superman's "Super" advances from his broad-toothed grin. In a print once crisply detailed, now seemingly corrupted by many generations of reproduction, the Spanish in Renaissance finery land, erect their cross, and are greeted by generous natives . . . To indicate all the visual content of this panel would require pages of commentary, for beyond the quantity of citations there is the cumulative impact of so many disruptive conjunctions. The complex agency of collage is operative at every level.

Turning to the text, one discovers yet another stratum of composite meaning. What at first appears to be a solid block of scripted narrative, turns out to be strewn with another typeface, reserved for a series of fake brand names and acronyms: "DISCOVERY PRODUCTIONS, NAFTART, EMPTY-V. . ."—which form a perfectly absurd text of their own. Like the "illustrations" which surround it, the text borrows and subversively joins familiar names and notions from the history of cultural relations between European/North American powers and Mexico to tell a story in double-edged terms, every pairing and substitution of which holds within it a critical blow to strike. "In 1991, President Belso-Bush appointed a QUINCENTENARY FIESTA BUREAU," A Brief History begins, "to link the alleged 'discovery' of the New World with the fiction of New World Order. Super star Christy Columbus was designated the Bureau's



Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Enrique Chagoya, Felicia Rice, *Codex Espangliensis*, 1998, Santa Cruz, Moving Parts Press

symbol of a kinder, gentler expansionism and Free Trade Art." As markers of a shared discursive category, the typographical distinctions first noted further what begins on the textual level; the drawing of unspoken connections and the spawning of metaphorical implications that make this "account" function as an instrument of political awakening—the opposite of History as Lullaby.

As these pages reveal more threads of meaning, the reader becomes implicated in the twists of the story. There is a rising sense of horror surrounding one of the basic elements of composition: the red ink. For the first page or two, it is possible to maintain an idea of its use that fit safely into a familiar print tradition: red used as a highlight on a predominantly black and white page. (To maintain this version requires repressing the memory of the thickly red-washed front cover.) But these "highlights" seem more and more like splashes, and their placement—not merely at the heart, but on the tips and sleeves of things—soon becomes questionable. By the turn of the book's third fold, the presence of red ink dripping off severed limbs and chopping blocks, flowing in a nightmarish river behind a scene of Indians massacred by their Conquerors, must be identified as blood. Worse yet, the margins of this page are covered in bloody fingerprints; the implication of the reader is complete.

The overall typographic composition of the

book complicates the division of page-spreads and enriches the effects of repetition and change within the images and sequences. For instance, across the top edge of the introductory panel in red script is the question, "¿dónde radica la diferencia entre el arte de libre comercio y un tratado de libre cultura?" The following panel, as noted above, has the red word "Pregunta" placed above a text block in the upper right hand corner. Opening the right fold of the panel reveals the continuity of the line these two parts complete. This continuity over a fold would not be surprising in an accordion book, were it not for the fact that the image compositions of *Codex Espangliensis* so firmly define two-page spreads which the typography generally respects and enhances. The style changes from one spread to another, for example, rely on the turning of the page (rather than an opening of the folded edge) to create an echo effect. Such an effect is achieved between the same word "pregunta" and, going backwards to the previous spread, where the words "Many burning questions remain" are printed in the same red type, in the same upper righthand corner as their Spanish precedent. It is perhaps tedious to describe such a detail, yet strategy and its success on such levels are essential to understanding the richness of a book like *Codex Espangliensis*.

The text was taken from performance scripts by Guillermo Gómez-Peña and the collage com-



Guillermo Gómez-Peña

contd., from page 23

positions made by Enrique Chagoya. Their names are on the book's title block but it was Felicia Rice, the woman behind Moving Parts Press, who invited these two artists to collaborate on a book with her. Despite the fact that two artists and one press are named on its cover, I would argue that *Codex Espangliensis* is not a *livre d'artiste* as much as an artist's book, and the book's artist is Felicia Rice. Much could, and surely will, be said of the writing and visual artistry of *Codex Espangliensis*, but the structuring of the book's content by the design, from portfolio box to page sequence, from image and text relationships to typography, rivals and complement's Chagoya's imagery in careful treatment and reckless stretches. The integrity and intention behind every choice and execution of the book's production from binding to paper, ink, impression, and platemaking are not factors that merely support or reproduce qualities inherent in the text and images of the *Codex*; they are elements of the very conception and meaning of this piece. In her article in *JAB4*, entitled "ALL DRESSED UP WITH NO PLACE TO GO: THE FAILURE OF ARTISTS' BOOKS," Janet Zweig quotes Lucy Lippard: ". . . the artist's book is a work of art on its own, conceived specifically for the book form . . ." *Codex Espangliensis* is such a work, devised with great and intimate knowledge of the form and a remarkable sense of the potential of the material to



Felicia Rice & Enrique Chagoya

become a fully active book. The concentrated fruits of collaboration are readily perceptible in *Codex Espangliensis*, in Rice's profuse and sophisticated response to the work she solicited from Gómez-Peña and Chagoya.

—end

Emily McVarish is a book artist living in California.

*Codex Espangliensis* and its prospectus are available from:  
 Moving Parts Press  
 10699 Empire Grade  
 Santa Cruz, CA 95060  
 Phone: (408) 427-2271  
 Fax: (408) 458 2810

It was produced in an edition of 50 of which 35 are for sale.



**BROACHING TEXTS AND READING MATERIAL:  
ARTIST BOOKS BY ROBBIN AMI SILVERBERG  
BY LOIS MARTIN**

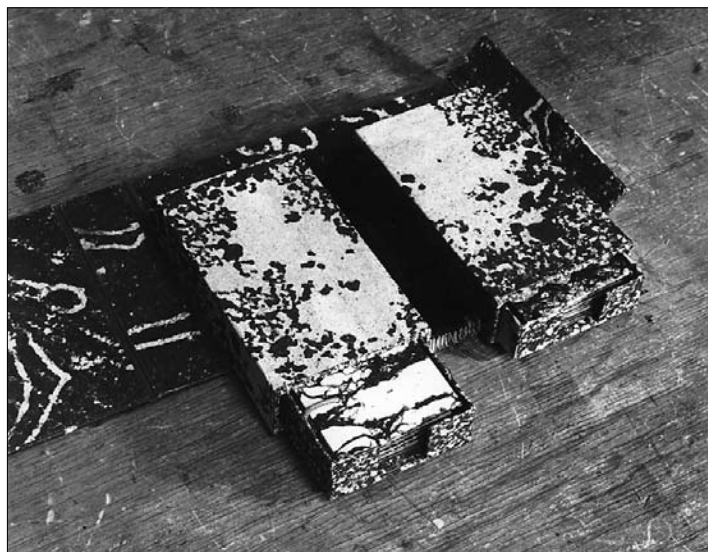
As Founder of Dobbin Books and an active teacher for many years, Robbin Ami Silverberg has produced a great number of artists' books—both on her own and in collaboration with other artists, all over the U.S., Canada, Europe, and South Africa. In this essay, I want to restrict my discussion to only a small portion of her oeuvre: four solo productions that all refer in some manner to cloth or cloth-making. Historically textiles have often served some of the functions of writing. (1)

The earliest in the series is *Brush* (1995 -6), a book whose sensuousness is tongue-tying. The outer case of *Brush* is covered with dark mottled paper which glistens faintly with flakes of mica. Swirled into the clouded mottling is an image of the Egyptian goddess Nut, stretched protectively over a starry night sky. Silverberg created both image and pattern by fiber manipulation during papermaking: Nut was drawn with a waterpik tool, and the clouded sky was painted in pulp. (2) Inside, two small boxes sandwich a middle swath of soft fur. Lifting the boxes reveals that the brush between them is a pleated accordion; its hairs have been attached one-by-one into the top crease of each fold; the fringed form is as flexible and startling as a slinky, begging the question, as Silverberg says, "What IS she doing?"

Each box holds a small drawer, which slides open by means of a fingertip-sized cut-out, to reveal a palm-sized book with one or two words are stitched into each page. The twin texts are near identical: "I feel only sadness after I speak to her slowly", says one, and "I feel only sadness when I speak to her gently", says the other. The matching words are stitched in hair, those that differ ("when", "after", "slowly", "gently") are written in hair-thin shiny copper wire.

Silverberg stitched this book during a struggle with emotions which refused to be contained by language. Words are limited in their ability to reach across chasms of despair. What can you say, in the face of terrible grief? You murmur, and you hold and stroke. With her near identical sentences, Silverberg considering the way language extends itself, but still fails. The two lines alter meaning, yet still fail to transmutate the feeling she was trying to pin down: that, she feels, is carried more accurately by the ritualized choreography of actions (of opening, and pulling, and lifting, and reading) which she imposes on the reader; the protective nested structure of box within box; and poignant tactility of the materials themselves. Like a tiny stage, the small scale of the book demands awkward, minute actions which force the reader's awareness of his own movements.

A book of words is sometimes like a basket of holes, a hobbled conveyer of meaning. Consider Virginia Woolf's description of Orlando's prayer book; "It was a little book bound in velvet, stitched with gold, which had been held by Mary Queen of Scots on the scaffold, and the eye of faith could detect a brownish stain, said to be made of a drop of the Royal blood . . . In the Queen's prayer book, along with the blood-stain, was also a lock of hair and a crumb of pastry. Orlando now added to these keepsakes a flake of tobacco, and so, reading and smoking, was



Robbin Ami Silverberg, *Brush* (sequence of opening), 1995 - 1996





Robbin Ami Silverberg, *Morning Prayer*, 1997

contd., from page 25

moved by the human jumble of them all—the hair, the pastry, the blood-stain, the tobacco—to such a mood of contemplation as gave her a reverent air suitable in the circumstances, though she had, it is said, no traffic with the usual God.” (3) Surely Orlando is reading velvet, smallness, crumbs, and stains as closely as words. Woolf goes on:

“for as the ear is the antechamber to the soul . . . the poet’s is the highest office of all . . . No time, no devotion, can be too great, therefore, which makes the vehicle of our message less distorting. We must shape our words till they are the thinnest integument for our thoughts” (4)

Silverberg’s simple phrases are certainly whittled down to the “thinnest integument”; but even more so, the time and devotion she has lavished on their “vehicle” makes them speak. The textures and beauty of her containers are like prosody in spoken words, what linguists call the “supersegmentals” of emotional intonation which link the individual word segments into longer phrases of rising or falling pitch.

Late 20th-century “craft” aesthetics emphasizes the maker’s hand in such a way as to often champion crude, rough work (considered expressive), as opposed to the mechanical and machine-made. (I am thinking, for example, of the lumpy weaving and clumpy pottery which had its heyday perhaps in ‘70s crafts fairs.) But for centuries previous there was a kind of craft aesthetic which made its impact by taking a beyond-compulsive approach to construction, and overwhelming the viewer in wonder and amazement with an infinity of small stitches and fine

finish. This is the kind of seamlessness and patient painstaking work in *Brush*. Rationally, the viewer knows that each hair was glued into place by Silverberg’s hand, yet their individual multiplicity suggests notions of infinity.

The dully repetitive gesture is the constant refrain of textile artist. Contemporary quiltmaker Katherine Knauer calls it: “Semper tedium.” (5) Well into the 20th century in the West, girls were encouraged to learn sewing and needlework, partly because tiny, neat stitches were thought to contain unruly spirits (“Idle hands the devil’s playmate” sort of thing) and inculcate docility. On the one hand, there is an aspect of torture in to such handiwork. And not only in the deading drudge of it; it exacts as well a toll on muscle and bone: an astonishing number of weavers, knitters, quilters and sewers suffer terribly from carpal tunnel syndrome and tendonitis brought on by the myriad, minute movements of fingers and wrists.

And yet on the other hand, there is a soothing quality to such repetitive action, a “centering” of concentration and breath. Like acts of penance (Silverberg suggests the example of hitting oneself on the chest), acts of grinding routine can have an affirmative, uplifting side. Silverberg likens her planting of the hairs into the fold to creating a garden as well as a brush: it is like a “growth” of hair.

The three other books in Silverberg’s series began with a sort of exorcism. In 1994, Silverberg found herself thinking about book manipulation, and wanting to experience the impulse. Without real conscious decision, she found in her hands the small, white-leather-bound, gold-embossed Daily Prayer Book (in Hebrew & English) which she had been presented with on the

occasion of her bat mitzvah years before. Sitting down and opening it up, she began to systematically cut out the name of God where ever it appeared.

This "incisive" act budded from the residual anger—still warm—at the misogyny of the god portrayed there. Part-way into the book, Silverberg stopped, ashamed of her vandalism. As she says, "I found no catharsis; I was simply mimicing others' hacking."

Out of this experience, and other meditations on sacred form, ritual, and blasphemy, grew **The Emperor's Clothes** (1997, edition of 2), a quiet page-turner with a clear textile referent on each page. The book literally weaves the phrases severed from the prayer book back together into a new context: again, book pages are sliced, but this time strips of paper, or strands of hair, or lines of text are woven into these slots. The book also tells the story of Silverberg's prayer book mutilation, and contrasts it to her young nephew's first nervous visit to a church. Throughout, Silverberg considers questions of visibility and invisibility, and how language has the capacity to both reveal and cloak experience, to make us see or not see.

Like all of Silverberg's books, **The Emperor's Clothes** is carefully made of beautiful handmade paper. The cover is blank and dark with anonymous promise; the inner papers Silverberg made in an 18th century paper mill in Austria; it is of a type called in the local German dialect hadern—which means paper made from cloth rags.

**The Emperor's Clothes** is beset with grids. Some are small as a postage stamp; some fill the page. Some are drawn, and some are empty (that is, the sheet is slashed vertically into slits like a warp, but nothing is interwoven). Most of the grids are woven with wefts (horizontal elements) of paper or hair. These vary in kind and size: from thick strips of mottled handmade paper, to thin strips of white paper with 8- or 9-point type, from individual strands of hair to thick hanks. In some, weaving becomes writing, as horizontal hair wefts run into lines of text. On one page, a tuft of hair is held in place with a strip of paper reading: "The clothes are not there." Later, a paper lever reads: "O Lord our God, King". On the final page, bundled strands of dark hair have been woven through slits cut into the page, forming a stark black and white image. Like a photographic print and negative, the patterning reverses on the front and back of the page—"under, over" on the face of a weaving becomes "over, under" on its back. (6)

A single figurative image occurs in the book. It is a simple outline of a suit of clothes, and like the emperor's outfit, moves between the visible and invisible. Twice it appears as a faint watermark when the page is held to the light, only to disappear when the book is lying flat. On another page, an intaglio of the same figure has been pressed into the page. The image and its surrounding page have been repeatedly pierced with small pin- or needle-holes. Only pressure created this image; only raking light or fingertips reveal it.

This book slips and slides between "text" and "textile" and "texture". The paper itself, made of woven rags, is rewoven. The slits and weaving, and watermark and intaglio images all conspire to activate its pages. Rather than a surface to be scratched, the page serves as a substrate to be interpenetrated. Silverberg's marks are embedded within the two-dimensional plane of the page, so that they read through on both sides, and many are more arresting tactilely than visually. All of these are qualities

more usually associated with weaving than with writing; but they also remind me of a series of children's books which a friend of mine made to teach blind children to read. She translated the texts from regular children's books into braille, and the pictures into textured collages. Silverberg's books would need no such translation; they are as appealing to the fingertips as to the eye.

A third work, **Sixty-four Stones**, Silverberg calls an "unbound book". It was made for a show on domestic violence at the Hebrew Union College Gallery in the fall of 1997. The piece consists of sixty-four squares of handmade linen paper, thin as dried skin, and with a faint, sour whiff of dead flesh. Each contains a smooth stone, which alludes to the biblical prescription for a discovered adulteress: death by stoning. (Since inheritance was patrilineal, a woman potentially impregnated by another man could not be allowed to live, as she might give birth to a rival's son. Capital punishment was mandated even in cases of rape.)

Some sheets are embedded with broken bits of domestic life, suggesting discord and upheaval at home: broken crockery, twisted silverware, ripped kitchen towelling. These "women's things" also suggest imprisoning domestic responsibilities. Linen historically was so frequently the material of domestic fabrics that we still refer generically to "bed linens", "table linens", and "linen closets". Silverberg's materials also references Talmudic prohibitions and prescriptions concerning the behavior of women: what fiber should be used for the wick of the shabbat candle (hemp, not uncombed flax); what container should hold the oil (not an egg shell); how, where, when, and with what kind of stone one should execute the adulterous wife. The rent dish-towel recalls the rending of garments in grief, and mourn the spirit strangled under relentless chores and tight prohibitions.

Scraps of images, like a bit of film still showing broken eggshells, and pictures of single eyes (the All-Seeing, Who did not see), are also sprinkled throughout the sheets; some are scorched with marks burned into them. Fourteen of these sheets are left loose; 50 are wrapped over boards, like the neat, sharp-cornered hard covers of a bound book. The stretching of the sheet over the board maintains the feeling of the paper, but pieces and bits of debris in them forces the sheets to bubble out from the surface of the board. Silverberg mounted all 64 to the wall with straight pins in a 8 x 8 square arrangement. Tiny snips of paper are also pinned to each sheet, like dead butterflies in a specimen case. Some snippets contain a phrase severed from the prayer book; others a single letter from this verse from the Morning Prayer: "Blessed art Thou / O Lord our God / King of the Universe / Who hast not made me a woman" (which contains 64 letters).

The final book, called **Morning Prayer**, 1997, is a boxed set of square sheets similar to those of **Sixty-four Stones**. Again, they are embedded with stones, with rags, and bits of household detritus, and made of linen. Some are torn and patched. The final sheet in the box contains the familiar line of the Morning Prayer ("Who hast not made me a woman"), still as if sliced from the prayer book. Silverberg has attached it to the sheet with the tiniest stitches of gold thread, compulsively bound. The minuteness of the stitches recall the trails of tiny bitter stitches through human history—from the centuries of prescription for the feminine to the ghastly exploitation of predominantly female textile workers, still going blind and crippled with ghastly regularity in

contd., on page 28

sweatshops all over the world.

Like a page in *The Emperor's Clothes*, the box itself is hand-made paper which has been repeatedly pierced with a pin-sized hole — that is, broached so that light comes through, as if forcibly enlightened or elucidated. The corners of the *Morning Prayer* box are held together with small brass safety pins, as if they were the banal, insistent awl which had perforated its sides.

Whether "straight" or "sheathed" (as a brooch or safety pin is, with a protective cover), the lowly pin has centuries of rich association for women's history. For most of human history, women nursed young children well into toddlerdom, so that the bodice of a woman's garment could not be sewn closed but had to open so the child can reach the breast and nurse—so the archetypal woman's garment throughout history and around the world was held closed with pins: especially in times before buttons, zippers, or gromets for lacing holes. (7)

The pin might seem a trifle, but tradition holds that Queen Hecuba of Troy used hers to wreak a terrifying vengeance on her son's murderer. Euripides tells the story of how she and the other royal Trojan women prisoners-of-war tricked her son's murderer into their tent, and then blinded him by plunging their brooch pins into his eyes. (8)

William Safire in a recent essay was inspired by the story of the brooch allegedly presented by President Clinton to his intern Monica Lewinsky to consider the word's etymology, which like the verb broach goes back to Latin brocca, "spike". "As a noun, broche [in Middle English] meant 'a tapering pointed instrument', like a spear, bodkin or a spit on which to roast meat . . . As a verb, to broach carried forward that meaning of turning, . . . or enlarging a hole with a boring bit . . . That 'digging into' sense lead to the current major meaning, 'to introduce, to give vent to, to utter,' . . ." (9) In both *Sixty-four Stones* and *Morning Prayer*, Silverberg has used pins as an instrument: as a weapon to squewer the Prayer Book verses, and a tool to add her own commentary.

In 1624, the English poet John Taylor ridiculed the idea of needles and pins as women's weapons in his poem "In Praise of the Needle", and lauded them for rendering women "powerless, silent, and still" (10) : "And for my countries quiet, I should like, / That woman-kinde should use no other Pike, / It will increase their peace, enlarge their store, / To use their tonges less, and their needles more." But in some ways, needles can be as expressive as "tonges". In their studies of the textiles and language of highland Guatemala, anthropologist Barbara and Dennis Tedlock find overlaps, observing: "Among the contemporary Quiché weavers, textile designs are considered to be ancient, which makes their continuing use something like the quotation of an ancient text." (11)

All four of Silverberg's books beg the question of the relationship between text and textile. These connections have been of much recent interest to feminist art historians looking at traditional women's textiles. Authors Elaine Hedges, Pat Ferrero, and Julie Silber, for example, begin *Hearts and Hands: Women, Quilts, and American Society*, with the following: "When nineteenth-century women described their quilts as 'bound volumes of hieroglyphics' or as their 'albums' and their 'di'ries,' they were fully aware of what we have recently recognized: that their stitched fabrics were often the most eloquent records of their

lives . . . For vast numbers of nineteenth-century women, their needles became their pens and quilts their eminently expressive texts." (12)

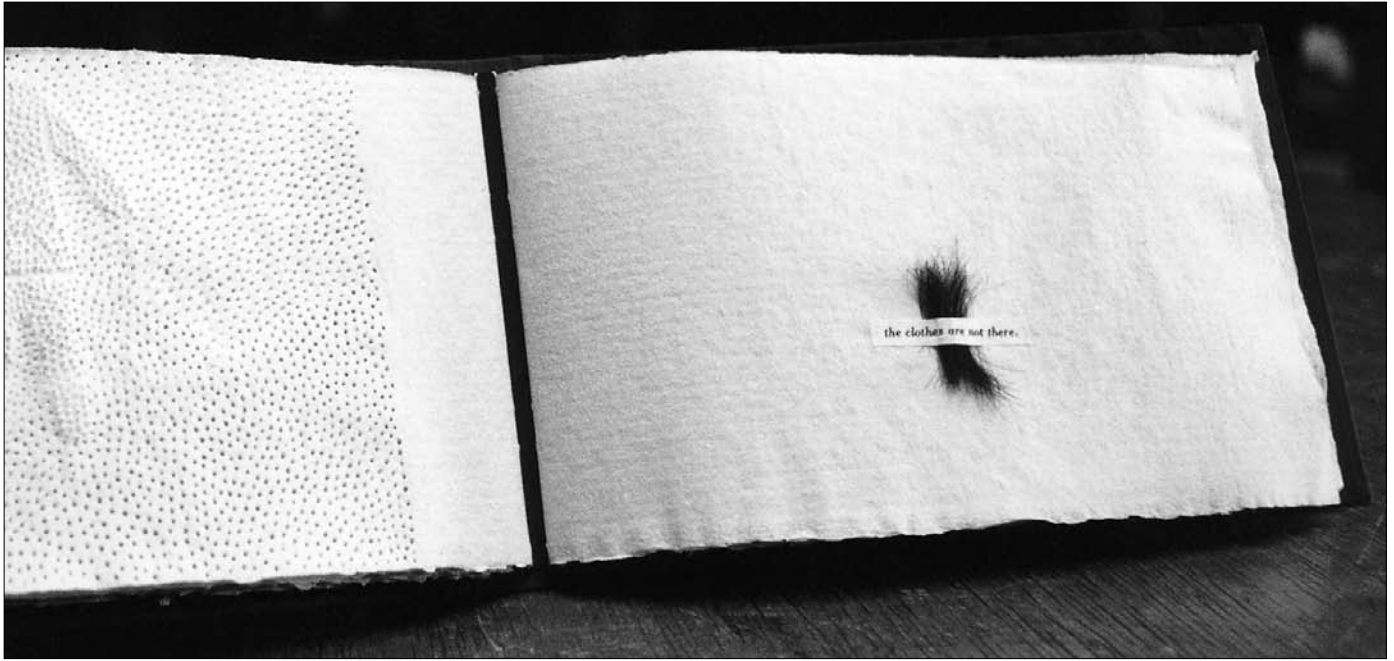
Lest such a statement be taken merely as exaggerated metaphor, it should be pointed out that anthropologists are describing traditional textiles around the world in similar terms. (13) Some of the most interesting observations come from research into the notation systems or deposits of information used by the amerindian people of the Western hemisphere, especially the civilizations of the pre-Columbian Andes, where information was encoded into weaving structures and knotted string devices called quipu, but no phonetic writing system was ever developed.

"Because in the West the concept of writing had been associated with the activities of scratching or the drawing of graphic signs on solid surfaces, Peruvian quipus presented a lot of difficulties to be interpreted and accepted also as writing." (14) Scholars involved in this research argue for the expansion of the concepts both of writing and of the book, pointing out the multiplicity of non-phonetic codes, notations, maps and models which we use today as alternate languages for communication.

They are also reexamining the history of writing and the book in the West, especially questioning the notion of its "evolution". In *Writing Without Words: Alternative Literacies in Meso-america & the Andes*, co-editor Walter D. Mignolo, observes: "Texo in Latin meant 'to make' and more specifically 'to weave'. By transference, it was also used in the sense of 'join or fit together', to interlace or intertwine. Hence, textum evoked the idea of something woven or made into a web." (15) Mignolo has also gone back to standard histories of the book and pointed out errors of cultural bias. He questions, for example, David Diringer's discussion in *The Book Before Printing of the "Libri Linthei"* (Linen Books) mentioned by Livy as having been kept in the temple of Juno Moneta in Roman times. Mignolo points out that these may not have been books at all, but just a cache of "writing on linen". (16) Formally, of course, I am reminded of Silverberg's unbound linen pages in *Sixty-four Stones* and *Morning Prayer*.

Finally, I beg the reader's patience for one more eccentric leap. When Silverberg originally described to me her Prayer Book mutilation, I could not help thinking back to what seemed to me to be the exact inversion of that instinct. That is the deposit of writings found near a temple in Fostat, Egypt, near Cairo, known as the Cairo Geniza. In a storeroom (called genizah), members of a Jewish community from the 10th - 13th century had preserved virtually every scrap of paper from their lives: from laundry lists to wills, bills, letters. These were not discarded because it was feared that somewhere on them, such as in the closing of a letter, for example, the word God might have been written. This extraordinary archive came to light in the 18th century; in recent decades it has provided scholars with virutally encyclopedic documentation of the lives of these people separated from us by a millenia. (17)

At first I was thinking of Silverberg's mutilation as the opposite of this careful preservation; envisioning the one as destruction and the other as conservation. But I see it now quite differently. I suddenly imagine Silverberg's exacto blade like the quilt-maker's sharp shears slicing into a fine new length of beautiful



Robbin Ami Silverberg, *The Emperor's Clothes*, 1997

yardage, cutting it to pieces. The impulse seems perverse, until one sees the pieces set in a new work. But then again, maybe it is perverse. Just as perverse as a quotation.

—end

Lois Martin is an artist and a textile specialist and lives in Brooklyn, NY.

#### NOTES

1. Especially the pre-hispanic civilizations of the Andes. A recent publication deals extensively with the topic: **Writing without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica & the Andes**, Elizabeth Hill Boone & Walter D. Mignolo, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).
2. The technique of pulp painting mimics that of the making of patterned felts. In a discussion of 8th century felts from Central Asia, textile specialist Alan Kennedy writes that feltmaking is "considered one of the most primitive means of textile production". See his essay "The Emperor's Treasure House: 7th & 8th century Textiles in the Shosoin" In **Silk & Stone: The Art of Asia** (London: Hali Publications, 1996), p. 151.
3. Virginia Woolf, **Orlando** (NY: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1928), p. 172.
4. Woolf, p. 173
5. personal communication
6. The particular nature of a textile plane has long intrigued me. (See: Lois Martin, "How Did Cloth Mean? Ancient Peruvian Plain Cloth and Cloth Planes", in **Surface Design Journal**, Vol. 20, no. 2) The topic seems to have been of great interest to prehispanic weavers, who often finished cloth so perfectly that it has no "right" or "wrong" side. Like a stained glass window, a design embedded into such a plane can be read from either side—but the two sides mirror each other. A design of a stick figure with one raised hand, for example, will be right-handed on one side of the textile, and left-handed on the other. Likewise woven patterns will contrast on either side. Like the weaver, Silverberg's gestures penetrate their plane; they are drawn in space, not on a surface.

7. "Hecuba", translated by William Arrowsmith in Euripides III. From **The Complete Greek Tragedies**, David Grene & Richmond Lattimore, eds. (Chicago: Phoenix Books, 1947).

8. In 1996, I attended a two-day Pre-Columbian Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, DC: "Recovering Gender in Prehispanic America". Much of the conference dealt with efforts to uncover the female presence in native societies from material culture. In session after session, scholars came down to only two objects in the archeological record which could reliably indicate the presence of women in ancient times: spindles (used to spin thread), and pins (used to hold female garments closed). In the Andes, pins called "tupu" were used to fasten women's upper garments together; just like the "fibula" of the ancient world.

In her monumental studies of prehistoric textiles, archeologist Elizabeth Wayland Barber came to believe that the almost universal correlation of women and weaving is based on truism first articulated by anthropologist Judith Brown: that women's work must be compatible with the raising of small children and infants — interruptible, and without dangerous tools or substances. Elizabeth Wayland Barber, **Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years** (NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994)

Likewise, the exigencies of small children and infants — and nursing them— would also seem to have forced the shape of women's garments. The child's body covering needed versatility as well; it is only in the late 20th century that the sticky flap closures of Pampers have displaced the diaper pin.

9. William Safire, "Broaching the Telltale Brooch". **The New York Times Magazine**, March 8, 1998, p. 26.

10. Rozsika Parker, **The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery & the Making of the Feminine** (NY: Routledge, 1989), p.86.

11. Barbara Tedlock & Dennis Tedlock, "Text and Textile: Language and Technology in the Arts of the Quiché Maya", **Journal of Anthropological Research**, Vol. 41, No. 2, Summer 1985, p. 126.

12. Elaine Hedges, Pat Ferrero, Julie Silber, **Hearts and Hands: Women,**

Quilts and American Society (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1987), p. 11.

13. Three examples:

a) Janet Catherine Berlo, in "Beyond Bricolage: Women and Aesthetic Strategies in Latin American Textiles": "For indigenous Latin Americans, especially women, cloth has always been an alternative discourse. Only recently have we really begun to listen." From *Textile Traditions of Mesoamerica & the Andes*, Margot Blum Schevill, Janet Catherine Berlo, & Edward B. Dwyer, eds. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), p. 439.

b) On the other side of the world: C.A. Bayly, "The origins of swadeschi (home industry): cloth and Indian society, 1700 - 1930": "Indian society spoke partly in the idiom of cloth, though idiom is really too weak a word since cloth could actually transfer power and transform relationships." From *The Social Life of Things*, A. Appadurai, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 302.

c) And the title of this article by Sarah Catherine Brett-Smith in *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, Vol. 2 (2), 1984, p. 127-147 on Bogolanfini, the mud-dyed cloth painted by Bamana women in Mali: "Speech Made Visible: the Irregular as a System of Meaning".

14. Walter D. Mignolo, "Signs and Their Transmission: The Question of the Book in the New World", in *Writing without Words*, p. 259.

15. Mignolo, p. 236.

16. Mignolo, p. 230.

17. S. D. Goitein was the preeminent scholar of the geniza records. See his fascinating multivolume work: *A Mediterranean Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

### UPCOMING IN JAB11

SPRING 1999

- Interview with Betsy Davids
- Essay on the bookworks of Lise Melhorn-Boe
- Reviews of new books by Keith Smith and Scott McCarney
- Essay on the books of Anton Würth
- Review of the exhibition and catalogue "Artist/Author: Contemporary Artists' Books", curated by Cornelia Lauf and Clive Phillpot
- Transcription of a panel discussion moderated by Martha Wilson, with Joan Lyons, Scott McCarney & Brad Freeman; held at Emerson Gallery, Hamilton College, Sept.. 98, in conjunction with the exhibition "Artist/Author"
- and more!

## THE *Next* WORD

TEXT and/as IMAGE and/as DESIGN and/as MEANING

THE NEXT WORD is an interdisciplinary exhibition of work in visual art, artists' books, visual poetry, and graphic design by artists who are examining the ways texts and images produce meaning in contemporary society. The daily landscape of late 20th-century American culture is saturated with visual and verbal messages, and many of the works in this exhibition reflect this daily experience with the look of language as an image. Artists have long been responsive to the visual properties of written language while poets and designers are intrigued by the inherent tension between reading a text for meaning and looking at its visible form. Whether committed to individual expression or serving commercial interests, artists in various fields currently make use of many of the same tools from conventional to digital media. Thus artworks, commercial productions, and advertising converse through a shared vocabulary of forms, while they remain distinct through their motivations and messages. — *Johanna Drucker, curator of the exhibition and Professor of Art History, Purchase College – State University of New York*

THE *Next* WORD will be on view at the  
 Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College  
 State University of New York  
 September 20, 1998 – January 31, 1999

The exhibition includes work by over sixty artists and is accompanied by a catalog with an essay by Ms. Drucker.

for more information please call or write:

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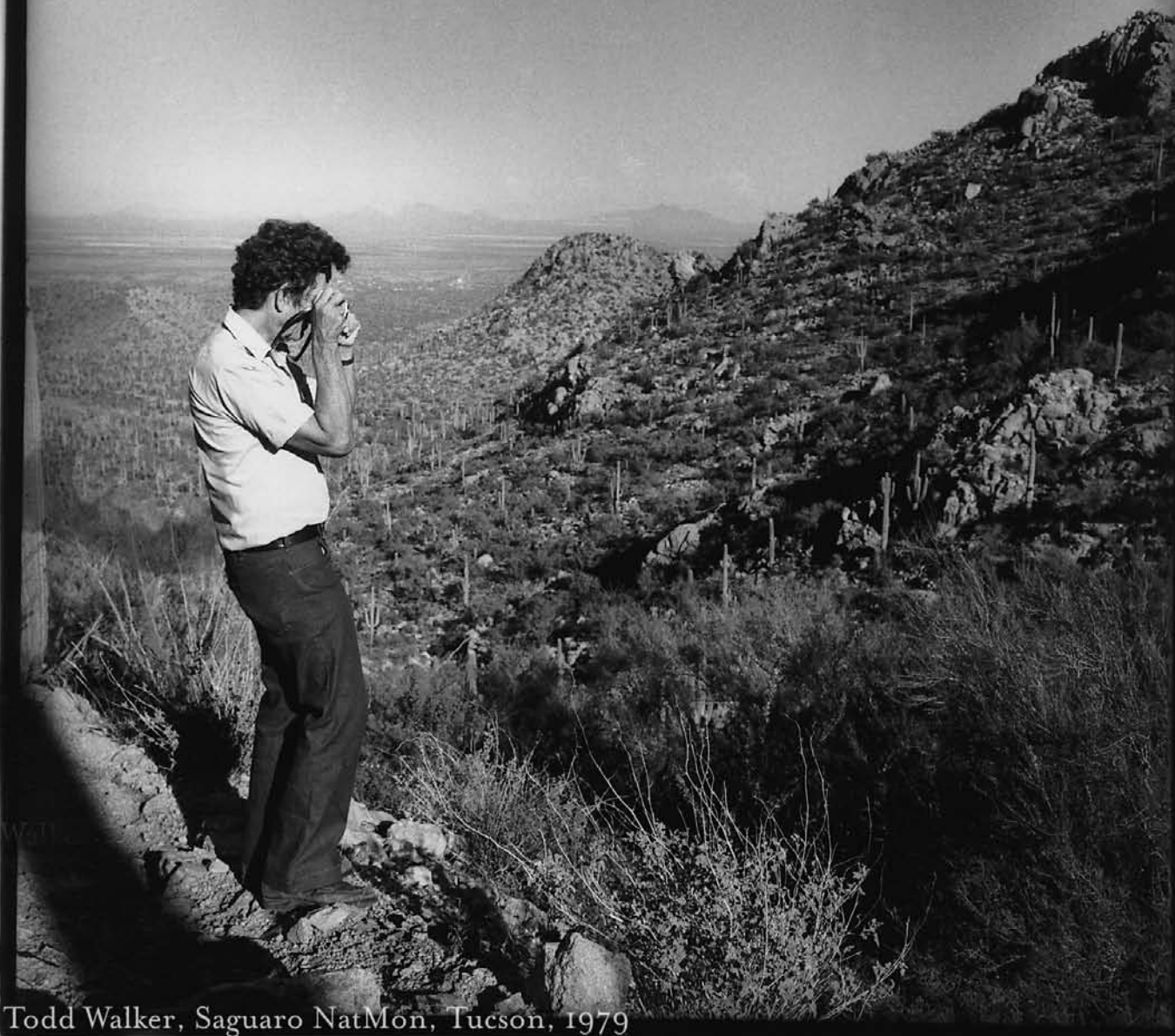


photo by BF

Todd Walker, Saguaro NatMon, Tucson, 1979

Todd Walker was an artist, photographer, printer, book maker and educator. He founded Thumbprint Press in 1965 in Tarzana, California. From 1970 until 1977 the press was located in Gainesville, Florida, after which it moved to Tucson.

He told visual/textual stories in his books by fully exploiting the spatio temporal qualities of the medium. One of my favorites, "Discussion," is in the book *Three Soliloquies* (1977); the piece is composed entirely of photographs of three people engaged in an intense conversation, Walker draws the viewer into the scene by deftly cropping hands, body language, and facial expressions within individual page openings and turnings. Though we are forever outside the conversation (the uncaptioned images remain mute) we feel the dynamics of their relationships through the formal tensions of the book's structure.

Walker experimented playfully with various new and traditional media associated with publication arts. In pre-computer days he

produced type by printing proofs on letterpress which he then shot onto lith film and ran offset with images. In 1982 Walker produced *Binary Banana Book* as his first work with computers. But since this was before the era of relatively inexpensive laser printers and service bureaus he made photographs of the CRT screen in order to make film to offset print the images. His skillful fluidity between media allowed for a clarity and beauty in the books and prints.

I met him a few times through his friend and my teacher, Joe Ruther. Todd & Joe sent audio tapes back and forth to one another and Joe played one of his favorites from Todd for me once—it was the sound of Zenobia, Todd's Royal Zenith offset press, running for about 20 minutes. He had just gotten it running and was delighting in the sound—as he knew Joe would.

Walker died in his sleep at home in Tucson this September.

—BF

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David Drucker, Minnesota

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