

A preview of

The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater: 1945-1985,

edited by Kevin Killian and David Brazil

(Kenning Editions, 2010). All rights reserved by the author and [Kenningeditions.com](http://kenningeditions.com)

Introduction

Why Poets Theater?

Kevin Killian and David Brazil

POETS THEATER IS FIRST AND FOREMOST about the scene of its production. This is a social scene, but it is also, crucially, a geographical scene, and the two are complexly interwoven. The locales of poets theater are vortices, almost in the Poundian sense—self-interfering energy patterns like lightning rods, established to receive the influxes of new energy from whatever direction (young people, passers-through, wild cards, etc.). Major efflorescences happen in both a place and a time; the cultural production of poets theater manifests itself in periodic form, usually a brief window of years.

During the past eighteen months, while assembling this anthology of US poets theater work from the period between 1945 and 1985, we—Kevin Killian and David Brazil—have looked to previous anthologies for inspiration. And for content too. In Michael Slater and Cynthia Savage’s anthology *Poets Theatre: A Collection of Recent Works* (Ailanthus Press, 1981), we first read Ted Greenwald’s *The Coast*, as well as the excerpt we print here from Bob Holman and Bob Rosenthal’s adaptation of Ted Berrigan’s “Western” *Clear the Range*. In Richard Kostelanetz’ performance-oriented collection *Scenarios: Scripts to Perform* (Assembling Press, 1980), we found Bruce Andrews and Lorenzo Thomas—well, their plays, that is. (*Scenarios* also contains Keith Waldrop’s play *The Same Sensation*, but we already “had” that; in fact it was Waldrop who pointed the way to *Scenarios*. So one discovery leads to a next through a familiar alchemy.)

Patrick Durgin, our publisher, suggested to start with that we take a look at Michael Benedikt’s *Theater Experiment: American Plays* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), an exciting book in its day and exciting still. Benedikt printed a great number of the plays one might have seen in off and off-off Broadway houses in the mid 60s—not only new work but plays from the past (Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, Thornton Wilder), as well as a selection of the Fluxus experiments of the day, the happenings, things like Carolee Schneeman’s *Meat Joy* for example. In the end, the present book shares with *Theater Experiment* only one author—Kenneth Koch as it turns out. Vibrant as Benedikt’s anthology is, it was still not what we were seeking to create—a historically based survey of what was happening in poets theater from year to year in the four decades after World War II. But why hadn’t this book already been done? Massive as this book is, we could have made it twice as big, because there’s so much interesting material. Why has no such comparable book been published?

Several possibilities emerged during the months of compilation. First and foremost, the material is widely scattered. You really need an extraordinary range of collaborators if you want to do the job properly, for no one person knows all about poets theater, and many of the texts bring new meaning to the word “fugitive.” Is poets theater even a genre at all? If so, during the period of our scrutiny, it was a genre with many heads and many narratives, not all of them parallel. It’s just as well that Patrick Durgin encouraged us to stop our survey in 1985: since then the trajectories of poets theater have continued to proliferate in such a way that to set an arbitrary term is the only possible delimitation. Since 1985, the revolution of poets theater has continued apace, though the main lines of development had been established by the mid-eighties. With increased institutional support there has been a veritable explosion of plays by poets in the past few years, with much of interest. And still poets theater, and poetry itself, continue to diverge like crazy, one taking the high road, one the low. Perhaps it is wisest to admit the absolute instability of a clear definition for “poets theater,” and instead to throw the pieces up in the air like confetti and watch the patterns as they settle on the street below. Asked to classify the theater work they wrote, no two poets will have the same description; and yet, like porn, we know it when we see it.

Poets theater grew in fits and starts, and differently in different regions of the US, a case study in uneven development. As such, different sectors of the movement aped each other’s progress in erratic ways, some of them hard to trace today. In the Northeast, you had the Cambridge Poets Theatre in capital letters, established in 1951 with a board of governors and printed programs; at Black Mountain College at the same time, the theater was more sketchy and provisional, its texts writ on water. Look at the way the archetypal Black Mountain event, the premiere of John Cage’s *Theater Piece No 1*, exists in a cloud of variant eyewitness accounts. What was performed, in what order, by which personnel, remains unverified, just like the notorious “6” Gallery reading in San Francisco, 1955 at which Allen Ginsberg read “Howl.” And yet Cambridge Poets Theater, and Black Mountain are examples of theaters with a measure of institutional backing, thus ostensibly serviceably indexed and archived. In every quarter of the nation, individual artists did what they could to make the dream come true, but sometimes we don’t have the documents to do them justice.

And just as individual theaters responded in part to local conditions, poets theater developed at a different pace than poetry itself even within the individual poet. Poets could take huge leaps in proprioception in their poetry, so that light years seem to elapse from book to book, but the plays they wrote seemed often to linger in the shadow of older models. Perhaps theater has been entangled deeper with the traditional than poetry? Even the most radical texts in this book engage perforce in at least a few of theater’s traditional trappings—the entrance, the curtain, the discovery scene—why, character itself—dialogue—conventions theater had built up over thousands of years. As we wound up wondering if somehow the poets were in fact conscious of the compromises they were making in dealing with the (by comparison) antiquated theatrical arts, for often they have treated their poets theater work as though they were ashamed of having done it.

In the early 50s, Weldon Kees and others organized the Poets Follies in San Francisco, evenings of skits and songs with the “folly” very much

foregrounded. In practice many writers with a serious investment in poetry exhibit an ambivalence toward drama, and it seems to stand in uneasy relationship to their real work, a little apart from it. Little of it is in print, even the plays of the greatest practitioners of poets theater. Neither fish nor fowl. For American writers, the figure of the fish out of water, the writer trying something theatrical, something out of established genre, will always be Henry James, whose failure in the theater, culminating with the knockout blow of *Guy Domville* (1890), precipitated a crisis of confidence. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick characterizes James' response to the failure of *Guy Domville* as a "narcissism/shame orbit" that on the one hand increased his sense of theatricality, while endlessly complicated his fear of his audience, and she adds, "In using the term 'audience' here, I want to mark James's own insistent thematization of elements in his writing as specifically theatrical, with all the implications of excitement, overinvestment, danger, loss, and melancholia that, as Joseph Litvak has argued in *Caught in the Act*, the theater by this time held for him."¹

There has long been an element of robbing Peter to pay Paul that has exacerbated poets' feelings about their own productions. The writer Nora Sayre, a participant in the Cambridge Poets Theatre of the early 1950s, wrote in a memoir that the poets she worked with there harbored conflicting measures of contempt and anxiety about using their talents for the stage, and used the absent British playwright Christopher Fry as a whipping boy. "Some detested the preciousness of Christopher Fry," writes Sayre, "—although their own productions were sometimes precious. They were disturbed by Fry's popularity because his work seemed to fulfill a public need in a philistine era—to assuage the audience's feelings of guilt for not reading poetry: a guilt that could be dissolved by the penance of seeing Fry's *The Dark Is Light Enough*."² Is a poets theater play a work of subtraction? Is the book you hold in your hands a giant minus sign—or black hole—representing the lack of an equivalent body of work its authors should have written instead? For some, poets theater was a sort of failed experiment, or perhaps in rosier terms a summer romance that fades when the real thing comes along. For some poets, their work in the theater occupied them for a brief season, no more. John Ashbery's work with the Cambridge Poets Theatre coincided with a very real reimagining of theatrical conventions, but once *Some Trees* was published, he wandered away from the stage and concentrated on developing his voice on the page.³

1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Shame, Theatricality, Queer Performativity," *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 39. Tellingly, Nick Salvato begins his study of the "closet drama" of Stein, Barnes, Pound and Zukofsky by considering their indebtedness to Henry James and the catastrophe of *Guy Domville*. And later we will see the literary executor of the visionary poet/playwright James Keilty viewing Keilty's 1960s move into an invented language as a strategy at least partially to escape Henry James's great shadow.

2 Nora Sayre, *Previous Convictions: A Journey through the 1950s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 195.

3 In a 1979 interview in *The New York Review of Books*, critic Helen Vendler asked the poet James Merrill about his brief dip into poets theater, and his reply convincingly speaks of theater as a temporary form of madness better moved away from pronto. "Before trying a novel I wrote a couple of plays," he recalled to Vendler. (The Artists' Theater—John Myers and Herbert

At least he left behind his three plays. Often the texts we wanted to show you have gone missing. From correspondence between editor Donald Allen and poet Robin Blaser in the late 1950s, it looks like Blaser was working seriously on a play based on the life of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Yet several searches through Blaser's papers at Simon Fraser University turned up zip. Likewise only a page or two of Jack Spicer's play *Sir Orfeo* (mid 1950s) has been located despite strenuous effort. Did the Universe not want us to read Blaser's Bernard, or Spicer's Orfeo? That we came up short in these instances might be a measure of general lack of esteem for poets theater. Many a manuscript was not deemed important enough to save—seen as disposable. The gorgeous play we bring you by Diane di Prima was fished from her wastepaper basket by a concerned friend.

In some cases the text has been the least remembered aspect of the production, and the poets involved have seen their contribution devalued, while critical and popular applause has been awarded the musicians, the set designers, the directors. Again take Black Mountain. A cadre of postmodern thinkers and artists had flocked to the experimental North Carolina school ever since its inception, but the immediate postwar period was perhaps its richest, even as enrollment was declining and Rector Charles Olson puzzled over how to earn the college a bigger name and secure better funding. In the summer of 1948 the college premiered Mary Caroline Richards' translation of Erik Satie's one act play, *The Ruse of the Medusa*. John Cage played Satie's score, Merce Cunningham did the dances, "decor" was by Willem and Elaine De Kooning, and Buckminster Fuller played the lead, while Ray Johnson worked backstage. No wonder Mary Caroline's name tends to drop out of legend.

And for every "Medusa," there were a few duds of course; that was part of the grim promise of poets theater. In the early 1950s the musician Lou Harrison came to teach, and the painters Cy Twombly, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg continued an on and off practice of study and work. In 1962 the archetypal Black Mountain event occurred, the fabled "first Happening," as Cage's *Theater Piece No. 1* got underway.

The *Theater Piece* involved a simultaneous, and unrelated, reading of poetry, dance, music, "chance action," and paintings. Four panels of Rauschenberg's *White Painting* were suspended from the ceiling in the form of a cross, and used as screens for the projection of slides, a flickering eight-millimeter film, and as background for the action. Cage, Mary Caroline Richards, and Charles Olson stood on ladders reading poetry, Merce Cunningham danced his way through the audience, and David Tudor played Cage's music on a "prepared"

Machiz—put them on in the Fifties.) Behind them lay one of my earliest literary thrills: to open a little Samuel French booklet, some simple-minded 'play for children,' and find on the page a fiction made up of stage directions more suggestive than any rendered narrative scene, and of words set down to be spoken by a real, undreamed-of mouth—my own if I wished! The effect was somehow far more naked, far less quilted, than the nicely written stories I fell asleep to. Twenty years later, I confused an exercise in dramatic form with 'writing for the theater'—that royal road to megalomania. But those two plays left me on fresh terms with language. I didn't always have to speak in my own voice." "James Merrill's Myth: an Interview" (*NYRB*, Volume 26, Number 7, May 3, 1979 [<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/7833>]).

piano, in which the sound was dampened by inserting pieces of felt and wood between the strings. The effect was like that of percussion instruments. Rauschenberg stood underneath his own *White Painting*, repeatedly switching on and off an old Edison horn record player, playing scratchy old Edith Piaf recordings...⁴

But many accounts of this happening drop the poets reading poetry from ladders. Poetry, so old hat!

The larger context is that of an artistic America moving away from the commercial and towards a perverse utopia of saving only what you couldn't get rid of. Rebecca Solnit's book *Secret Exhibition* illustrates this phenomenon by concentrating on "Six California Artists of the Cold War Era," who worked in impermanent forms, who used degraded materials, who rarely if ever showed their work to the public. "For them," she writes, "the making of art was an end in itself, a spiritual exercise, because there was no market or showcase for the result. Many works were made as gifts with a particular recipient in mind, but many more were made in the same spirit as jazz—for the joy of creation itself."⁵ And yet even in this context of contingency and provisionality, poets theater is still scarce on the ground. The Whitney Museum can fill several floors with visual artifacts of "Beat Culture and the New America 1950–1965," as it did in 1995, and yet we still don't have any video or audio of Robert Duncan's infamous staging of his *Faust Foutu* at San Francisco's 6 Gallery in early 1955.

Though, that may be changing. Our work on the postwar period of US poets theater has taken place at a time in which scholarly interest in the genre has been burgeoning, and we have benefited from the advice, assistance, and cooperation of scholars with projects just adjacent to ours, projects with some overlap. In 2010 Susquehanna University Press will publish *Poets at Play: An Anthology of Modernist Drama*, edited by the Buffalo-based scholars Sarah Bay-Cheng and Barbara Cole. *Poets at Play* concentrates on poetic production of an earlier era than ours, beginning with Stevens' *Three Travellers Watch a Sunrise* (1916), Millay's *Aria di Capo* (1920), H.D.'s *Hippolytus Temporizes* and e.e. cummings' *him* (both 1927), and Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower* (1928). William Carlos Williams' *Many Loves* (1942) approaches the postwar, and Gertrude Stein's *The Mother of Us All* (her final play, written 1945–1946) takes us right into the period of our study, while Pound's Sophocles "translation" *Women of Trachis* (1956), which he wrote at St. Elizabeth's, appears right in the middle of our era. None of these poets were born in the 20th century. The editors of the present volume had already, arbitrarily or not, decided to exclude from our survey the American modernists already established as poets before WWII, even if as it happens they continued to write plays well into our postwar period—T. S. Eliot, Kenneth Rexroth, Archibald MacLeish, Pound, Djuna Barnes, Langston Hughes, Robert Frost, Louis Zukofsky, Lorine Niedecker and many more. As the scholar Nick Salvato suggests, a "drama completed by Barnes, for instance, in 1958 or by Zukofsky in 1967 bears a closer

4 Mary Lynn Kotz, *Rauschenberg: Art and Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004).

5 Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1990), pp. 15–16. Solnit's artists are George Herms, Bruce Conner, Jay DeFeo, Jess, Wallace Berman, and Wally Hedrick.

aesthetic and theoretical resemblance to one of his or her own (or each other's) earlier works than it does to certain contemporaneous works by a younger generation of American writers."⁶

Salvato's forthcoming *Uncloseting Drama: American Modernism and Queer Performance* covers the same period as the Bay-Cheng/Cole anthology, but from a different perspective. He writes on Pound, Zukosky, Stein and Barnes, and in the course of considering the status of the poets theater as "closet drama," he then explores the underlying potential of this drama to critique and disrupt mimesis. An audacious thesis, but Salvato unpacks it all so that it makes a queer sort of sense. He analyzes earlier readings of closet drama as mistaken in insisting that such work, by refusing to be played in the theater, makes a virtue out of anti-theatricality, or opposes its anti-theatrical tendencies to what might be imagined as the "pro-theatricality" of contemporary avant-garde movements. "Just as the closet drama approaches the stage (if it does so at all) ambivalently and ambiguously, so does the queer refuse to fit neatly into stable sexual roles. Thus, queerness produces confusions and contortions akin to those of closet drama, and closet drama provides a uniquely suitable space for the expression of queer sensibilities." This leads us into thinking about poets theater on a similar scale, for if it does nothing else it certainly shares with the closet drama an "ambivalent" and "ambiguous" relation to the stage, as we will see.

We have also been following *The Grand Piano*, ten Language writers' attempt at "collective autobiography." The eight volumes issued as of this writing speak a good deal about the theater productions of the group. Thanks to Barrett Watten, we have seen something of the forthcoming anthology of *Poetics Journal* texts that he and Lyn Hejinian are editing, which contains a large section on Kit Robinson's play *Collateral*.⁷ These scholarly exegeses of poets theater testify to two separate strands of interest now tied firmly to the subject—admiration for what has been done, and still a lingering doubt as to its value—or not even its value, but as to what precisely it was. In the judgment of theater history, poets theater has become a subdivision of "textuality," bourgeois textuality, and therefore opposed to the avant-garde, director-and-performance-dominated theater of the 60s—words on a page, opposed to the wordless energy of the essentialist theatrical moment. Now how to attempt recuperation of this discredited, even bourgeois genre?

ONE COULD TRACE THE ROOTS OF POETS THEATER back at least to the turn of the 20th century, when an actual Broadway success by an actual avant-garde poet, William Vaughan Moody's *The Great Divide* (1906) set off a race among his friends and rivals (among them, Robert Frost and Edwin Arlington Robinson) to profit from public interest in poetic drama. (This brief and little-known episode in US

6 This quote and those in the next paragraph are from the introduction to Nick Salvato, *Uncloseting Drama: American Modernism and Queer Performance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), which Dr. Salvato was kind enough to share with us prior to its publication, in a manuscript form that precludes accurate pagination.

7 Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten, eds., *A Guide to Poetics Journal: Writing in the Expanded Field, 1982-1998* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 2010).

poetic history is well told in Scott Donaldson's recent biography of Robinson.⁸) Behind this gold rush of excitement bubbled memories, perhaps, of the days when the greatest playwrights were poets, poet and playwright occupying the same body—ancestral memories of Shakespeare or Goethe; even in the Victorian era poets like Tennyson would write a tragedy for the West End every year and a half, just to keep their hand in—and in an age in which modernism had not yet created a specialized audience for poetry, an audience largely of fellow poets.

In the twentieth century, dozens of the principal figures of poetry had turned to the drama for one reason or another; for many, it was to create a wider audience for the message. Or to inculcate that audience with new ideals, as Brecht did by attempting the *Lehrstück*, or “learning play,” to provide what we would call today continuing education, or “on the job training.” At the same moment, the theater in general was thought to be reinventing itself after decades of relative inaction; people thought they were living in a great theatrical era. In the US, theaters like the Provincetown Playhouse served on the one hand as workshops for productions soon to be whisked off to Broadway and showered with lucre, and yet on the other they served as interdisciplinary art spaces in which the actors were writers and artists—thus anticipating one of the striking characteristics of postwar poets theater. In the first few years of the Provincetown Playhouse, for example, poets Mina Loy, Edna St. Vincent Millay and William Carlos Williams all acted, as did the modernist painters Charles Demuth and Marsden Hartley. Through the twenties poets continued to pursue individual visions through the collective energies of poets theater, and when the Depression hit the US, political ferment and an increased call for international cultural activism turned the stage into a Brechtian classroom of agitprop and socialist inquiry. Then during World War II, with the redeployment of manpower and cultural aims, the deck re-shuffled, and the wild cards fell onto the baize table.

In England the performance of poetry suddenly, during the war years, became a force to be reckoned with, a new form of social organization. Londoners under siege from the Blitz would gather together and brave enemy action to seek out a handful of theatrically inclined performers. Edith Sitwell, Dylan Thomas and others then made brilliant postwar careers touring America and bringing poetry to the masses. At the same time, radio drama was attracting a new generation of poets. In England the Group Theater had produced plays by T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, and soon the radio had gobbled them up.

American poets noted these developments and jumped on the bandwagon, but in doing so changed the bandwagon's direction, even its construction. American poets, too, took to the radio with various degrees of success, and in various capacities. It wasn't just Edna St. Vincent Millay guest starring on *The Kate Smith Hour*, yet nor was it only Ezra Pound making hellish Fascist broadcasts from Rome. A wide range of opportunities presented themselves to poets via the radio, and many joined in. Jack Spicer had his own radio show on KPFA, the listener-supported radio station in Berkeley, while Kenneth Rexroth interviewed Denise Levertov and Lawrence Ferlinghetti on the air. In the 1970s,

8 *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Poet's Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 240–245.

Susan Howe brought everyone from Charles Reznikoff to Bernadette Mayer to Elizabeth Bishop onto her show on WBAI, a non-commercial radio station in New York City. But in the postwar era, radio drama was still the king: you could turn on the radio and hear *Under Milk Wood* or Archibald MacLeish.

The poets theater of the US was a sail on a tide of nationalism. The New Critics and the historians of the American Renaissance had declared that, far from being a colonial culture living on borrowed aesthetics, America had a rich literary past and (the implication was) a fertile present. It is striking that the plays of Spicer, Olson and Duncan return to American Renaissance models for their plots—Spicer, to the haunted forest of Hawthorne; Olson, to the Melville he spent the 1940s reinventing to meet a new consciousness; and Duncan, to Hawthorne again, but to the tanglewood tales. The vibrancy of the new American self-confidence was bracing, and the poets followed Van Wyck Brooks, Newton Arvin and F.O. Matthiessen into imagining a literature renewed by the turbulence of midcentury. (After his celebrated turn from modernism, Robert Lowell became interested in the theater, and wrote *The Old Glory* in the early 1960s, a trilogy of one act plays based on Melville and Hawthorne stories.)

In such a mood the Cambridge Poets Theatre was created, in the wake left by the suicide of F.O. Matthiessen. The period of the Theatre's heyday was exactly a hundred years after the 1850-1855 American Renaissance he posited. An enormous coincidence no doubt, but no social undertaking proceeds entirely free of the shadow of the past. The presiding spirits of the Cambridge Theatre all had ties to Harvard in one way or another—Mary Manning Howe, V.R. Lang, Alison Lurie, Edward Gorey, the poets John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara.

Lurie's 1973 memoir of V.R. ("Bunny") Lang provides a compelling picture of Lang soaking in the Greek and Roman classics on the one hand, and on the other joining her confreres in endless drunken afternoons at Boylston Square burlesque theaters. There aged comics and blowsy showgirls provided what Eisenstein referred to as the "theater of attractions." The public flocked to burlesque to see something they weren't seeing at home, but the Cambridge crowd, drawn by the perverse spectacle, stayed for the lessons it taught them on how they might reconfigure their own poetic line.

Mary Manning had worked at Dublin's Abbey Theater, and brought with her something of its romantic dream of wedding lyric poetry with public policy. The present-day poets Fanny Howe and Susan Howe, Manning's daughters, worked in the theater as children and have written beautifully about it. In Fanny Howe's essay "Branches," the physical space of the theater (at 24 Palmer Street in Cambridge) comes alive through the attitudes of the humans moving through it:

There was a table for tickets on the left as you entered. There were all the bulbs and bars for the lighting overhead, a curtained backdrop, and often a stage set designed by an artist and lit by a student. Backstage did not offer much space for crouched actors waiting for their cues, so they galloped up and down the stairs into the smell of paste and face cream.

Down on Palmer Street and to the left of number 24 was Morris Pancoast's antique shop where all the costumes were kept and

many mirrors; he huddled in the back, white, bald, small, old, pointed, bemused, uncritical, watching the changing of the clothes and the application of makeup. The actors had to speed through the freezing cold and rain to gallop up the fire escape and dash backstage to await their turns. V.R. (Bunny) Lang was secretary for the theater in a big fur coat, bleached blond hair, and sexy red lips, and Richard Eberhart and Lyon Phelps (long and thin, dry and sad), were her bosses. The first play was *Try! Try!* by Frank O'Hara and was designed by Edward Gorey (long, morose, ironic, and damp). No one asked what good was poetry in such a brutal world. The Poets Theater dedicated itself to the resonance of language as a counterpoint to a theater of intention.⁹

Meanwhile across the USA other strains were developing and other poets, some inspired by the legends of the WPA Federal Theater Project, were working in smaller theaters. Russell Atkins wrote *The Corpse* and *The Abortionist* in Cleveland, plays rich with the violent obsessions of Hawthorne and something of the cruelty of Grand Guignol and its American equivalent, the folk legend. Gregory Corso staged *In This Hung-Up Age*, a bumptious souvenir of earlier poetic plays by Saroyan and Steinbeck, and a forecast of the highs and lows of the Beat Generation in which he soon found himself one of its loudest spokesmen. In New York the Living Theater, not yet a collective, was producing plays by Lorca, Cocteau, Pirandello, Brecht, Picasso and Jarry, mixed with Eliot (*Sweeney Agonistes*), Stein (*Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, among others), Rexroth (*Beyond the Mountains*), William Carlos Williams (*Many Loves*), and lots and lots of Paul Goodman.

Poets in Berkeley and San Francisco were also active in the theater, and it is tempting to give the credit to loud, vehement Robert Duncan, who had a hand in many of the most interesting poets theater productions of the 50s and early 60s. Once Duncan got together with the painter Jess Collins, it seemed natural that the two of them collaborate. With Harry Jacobus they started a gallery as a place where poets and artists could both present work, and it was at the King Ubu that Duncan, in the middle of a Gertrude Stein phase, presented Stein's play *The Five Georges* in the summer of 1953. The space changed hands and became the 6 Gallery, and it was there that Duncan staged his own play *Faust Foutu* in January of 1955, with a cast that included many playwrights, poets, filmmakers and artists, including Helen Adam, James Keilty, Michael McClure and Jack Spicer. At the climax of the performance Duncan himself rose and stripped naked, bringing a touch of the "real" to the painted stage.

Duncan's friend Keilty is a fascinating figure, a visionary whose artistic strategies grow steadily more interesting as time passes. Disdainful of traditional advice to develop one's own "voice," Keilty went to the opposite extreme and, inspired by *Finnegans Wake* and surrealist experiments, invented his own language, "Prashad," in which to present his work. Bay Area poets and painters acted in the one act plays Keilty presented through the heyday of the San Francisco Renaissance, wrapping their mouths around his weird syllables and striving to communicate through the sheer power of "acting." Novelist Samuel R. Delany,

⁹ Fanny Howe, "Branches," in *The Winter Sun: Notes on a Vocation* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2009), pp. 39-40.

who met Keilty in the 60s, recalled him in a recent memoir:

A frighteningly literate gay aesthete, he died of lung cancer in the early nineties. More obsessive than most, however, Keilty went so far as to invent his own language, complete with its own grammar and vocabulary, as well as an imaginary country and a culture to go with it. He wrote stories and folk plays in his invented language, Prashad. He began a lengthy novel in the language. He even went so far as to translate classic works of world literature into Prashad, such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Proust's *Du Côté de chez Swann*.¹⁰

At Black Mountain, Duncan bonded with what remained of the college's drama department, and when Black Mountain faded in the summer of 1956, many of the actors came west and began working with Duncan again. By this time, nearly every poet in the Bay Area was thinking about the theater, from Michael McClure to Helen Adam. A troubling internecine quarrel broke out when Duncan assailed James Broughton and Kermit Sheets for what he thought their damnable production of Helen and Pat Adam's 1961 musical, *San Francisco's Burning!* The bad blood was so vehement that it drove poor Helen Adam half-mad; after botching a suicide attempt, she checked herself into Langley Porter, the Bellevue of San Francisco. A year or so later, Duncan got a taste of his own medicine, so to speak. In a spirit of diabolerie, Jack Spicer organized poets to picket the 1962 production of Duncan's *Adam's Way*, on the grounds that Duncan had sold out. There was perhaps more theatricality outside the theater than on the stage in this case, since the pickets read, "Fuck Duncan, Fuck Jess," and "Fuck Chi-Chi."—Even today such signs would draw stares for their simple obloquy.

SOME HAVE SAID THAT THE "OFF BROADWAY" MOVEMENT, which eventually came to include much poets theater work, was the direct result of a decision by organized labor to relax their standards slightly, for the greater goal of finding members more work. With Broadway production shrinking, Actors Equity allowed a bylaw which would allow its members to appear in other shows, at a reduced rate, in 1949. The availability of a whole class of trained personnel gave birth to a new phalanx of theaters. The Cambridge poets like O'Hara and Ashbery, aligned with the Tibor de Nagy gallery, wasted no time in establishing an "Artists' Theater" run by the peripatetic gallery director, John Bernard Myers. The Theater began in 1953 with O'Hara's *Try! Try!* and Barbara Guest's *The Ladies Choice*; these productions were often designed by gallery artists like the wunderkind Larry Rivers, whose first solo show was also in 1953. Together O'Hara and Rivers gave theatregoers something to talk about in the subway.¹¹

10 Samuel R. Delany, *About Writing: Seven Essays, Four Letters, and Five Interviews* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), page 221.

11 The New York art and writing journal *Kulchur* (#9, spring 1963), produced a special number of the magazine featuring new plays from an emerging poets theater, with Rivers' grayscale drawing of Shakespeare on the cover. Writer Joseph LeSueur, who edited this "8 Plays" feature, published a brief note stating that "no effort was made to give scope and variety" to the selection, nor did he plan to suggest any trend in contemporary theater. Plays in the

Poets theater was likewise affected by the increased prominence of performance and installation art in the 1960s and 1970s, an age in which poets Vito Acconci and Yoko Ono made themselves art stars by bringing the physicality of the live experience to their increasingly conceptual writing.¹² Unlike previous conceptions of performance, the new conceptualists were reconnecting art and language in two complementary directions: exploring experience itself as textual condition, or as the medium of expression, and at the other end of the kaleidoscope, they were looking at language, measuring it, moving it around as a material medium like paint or neon. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, who came from Korea to the San Francisco Bay Area as a child, developed at UC Berkeley a dazzling and interlocking repertoire of film work, performance pieces, postmodern poetry, and political interrogation; her move to New York in 1980 and the subsequent publication of *Dictee* (1982) excited many with its effortless dissolve of genre. During the same period, in dizzying combination, the new freedoms of second wave feminism, gay liberation, the Black Arts movement, and other ethnic-centered political action groups gave rise to a thousand new plays with strong identity politics, and a new audience hungry for direct political confrontation. El Teatro Campesino, founded in 1965 in central California as the cultural arm of United Farm Workers, fielded a moveable theater in which—at least initially—all its actors, as well as all the people in the stands—most of them Chicano—were migrant workers and farm laborers.¹³

On the West Coast US language poets created a form of poets theater which could accommodate their linguistic innovations. This was a shortlived, high energy period, as much a directors' as a writer's theater, spearheaded by a pair of young, professionally trained graduates of UC Santa Cruz, Nick Robinson and Eileen Corder. Inspired by earlier theatrical traditions, and also by what they had learned from the revolutionary dramaturgy of the Teatro Campesino, Corder and Robinson were soon producing monsoons of dramatically effective subtext to some of the most opaque and diffused theater writing of the 20th century. Perhaps this has been the most documented iteration of poets theater due to a special issue of Bob Perelman's *Hills* magazine and much later scholarly interest, while both Corder and Robinson have written about this period with skill, as have other

issue included LeRoi Jones' *The Toilet*, Kenward Elmslie's *The Aleutians*, Barbara Guest's *The Dark Muse*, Diane di Prima's *Murder Cake*, and work by Ruth Krauss, Michael Smith, Arnold Weinstein, and Douglas Woolf. These ran the gamut, boasted LeSueur, from the Absurd to the "super-realistic," but because straight, naturalistic work was omitted, an optimistic conclusion might be drawn: "the non-commercial theatre is still very much alive."

12 Ono's "Snow Piece" poem from 1963 tells the reader/performer/actor/dreamer/activist to imagine that snow is falling "everywhere / all the time." The reader will, when talking to another, imagine that snow is falling on both parties. "Stop conversing when you think the / person is covered with snow." It's a theater for an audience that doesn't know a play is being performed—very strange. Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions and Drawings* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000), pg. 42.

13 Yolanda Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994) writes that critical and popular success, and then internal divisions within El Teatro Campesino, made it into a Janus-faced God, courting favor with the Great White Way and attempting still to speak to Chicano laborers on a grass-roots level.

participants—actors, poets, costumiers, designers, musicians, and audience members. And perhaps inevitably interest in the San Francisco Poets Theater has tended to overshadow other contemporary work, even writings by allied yet unaffiliated writers (Leslie Scalapino, Kathy Acker, etc). The San Francisco Poets Theater was, for all intents and purposes, over by 1983—only Carla Harryman of the original enthusiasts continued to work in this vein. And yet we can see in retrospect that Language poets’ interest in the theater served to lessen their resistance to narrative, and in the succeeding period narrative crept in like tents in the night. And there were always stalwarts (Lyn Hejinian, Ron Silliman, Barrett Watten) who resisted the call of the theater from the beginning. Again, one has the feeling that the plays produced by the SF Poets Theater weren’t considered as printworthy as their other works. We look at the Tuumba project, for example, 50 books edited by Hejinian during the heroic age of Language writing, and in vain we seek a play among them, though the format seems ideally suited for brief plays, and vice versa.

THE QUESTION OF GENRE FORMS A STUMBLING BLOCK in any work on poets theater, and this anthology is no exception. In collecting texts written in many different places and times under one rubric, we’ve been compelled to grapple with the question of what these writings have in common, or whether they have nothing in common.

The latter seems clearly false, but if the former is true, what can we say these texts have in common? What, in other words, makes something a “poets theater” play?

Is it any play written by a poet? Must it be tied to a “scene”? Is the amateur, “Sunday painter” aspect of this form of cultural production essential to its impact, or is that merely a collateral or vestigial result of lowered expectations? In practice our editorial policy involved actively ignoring the experimental theater work of Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson, Mac Wellman, Meredith Monk, JoAnne Akalaitis, many others, looking instead for plays by writers with an independent reputation as poets. But not in a hard and fast way either. For example, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka’s reputation as a playwright is probably equal to his formidable presence in and influence on American poetry, and it’s tough to figure one apart from the other. *Dutchman* was an obvious choice for what it says about his contemporary development as a poet, although it is just as often anthologized as a flashpoint in American drama and Black Arts. So is Ed Bullins’ work a kind of flashpoint, yet it is less a hallmark of a singular poetic practice, as is Ntozake Shange’s *spell #7*, in addition to its impact within feminist culture. In the context of Chicano culture, Luis Valdez’s work in theater is as experimental and influential as can be, and crosses paths with the social function of poets theater in many ways. But our selections mainly veered toward writers whose theater works were important though non-identical to the work upon which their reputation was built.

Potential anthologists might well have been at a loss on how to organize or display what amounts to the immaterial labor represented by poets theater. It has always been an event rather than a text, and has therefore been hard to talk about, hard to treat, hard to take seriously. Frankly some of these texts qua texts

are howlingly bad, but they document stages in a long history of dematerialization of the art object. By 1973, when art writer Lucy Lippard published *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, many of the insights she took from contemporary visual arts practice had already been anticipated by poets theater work, and it's no accident of course, because so much of this material came from the same roots as, and shared the characteristics of, the modernisms and the politics of, the art works that preceded them.

Though there's no rigid definition of poets theater, one way to try to articulate its shape through time is to try and catch it performing its social function. These plays occupy a charged social space between the disputed territories of performativity, theatricality, and the textual. In trying to think of a general principle that might connect all three, and to define "the social function" of poets theater, we were led to think about the social function of Greek theatre in the classical age. Theater, as a public, indeed civic, event, was that instrument via which the body of the citizens could see and experience itself, and most particularly its deepest conflicts and crises. In tragedy, this takes the form of explorations of kinship, law, justice, right, piety and so on. In Old Comedy, whose only extant exemplar is Aristophanes, the citizens of the polis can see satirized both individuals (Aristophanes mocks Socrates by name in *The Clouds*, just as poets theater might satirize some literary buffoon in a roman à clef mode) and types. There's also plenty of space for word play, in-jokes, throwaway topical references, and so on.

Anyway, it's here something close to the spirit of poets theater proper obtrudes. If instead of the instrument of self-reflection of the polis we think of this theater as the instrument for self-reflection of the coterie we might throw some light on what it has meant in our period. David Buuck's 2007 "Some Remarks on Poets Theater," written for a San Francisco festival of contemporary work, defines the genre in terms of what he calls counter-professionalism, anti-illusionism, rigorous amateurism.¹⁴ The very conditions of coterie production, often enough

14 David Buuck, "Some Remarks on Poets Theater," in *SITE CITE CITY* (Oakland, CA: BARGE, 2008). For the curious, his remarks include the following proscriptions:

PT performances are not plays. Some poets can write good plays, but most cannot and should not. If a poet writes a great play, it should not be PT, but should be in a book instead.

At the same time, neither is PT merely skits or sketches. PT is a scripted event. That is, PT is written solely to occasion the getting together of the cast and the audience.

[...]

PT only occurs during the performance of the piece in front of others (and, often, at the bar afterwards).

No budget. Props and costumes should be homemade and/or cobbled together from what folks have at home.

Anti-illusionism. Props are only ever props, not the things they are meant to represent. "Actors" are not their roles, but just people (or, if you can't get any people, poets).

involving impromptu performance spaces, improvised props, and zero budget, call forth a style of theatre whose disorderly elements bring to mind the topsy-turvy “world turned upside down” that Mikhail Bakhtin characterizes in his writings on Rabelais as the carnivalesque.

Obligated, then, to arrive at a conclusion about the genre of poets theater, we might claim that its disorderly hybridity is its genre—that it is, perhaps, a genre in the process of formation, emerging out of the destabilization of sorts of prior forms, social as well as literary. In other words, new scenes of production and new social formations equal new genres. And this is one of them—perhaps, despite its apparently minor character, a crucial one.

Poets theater is praxis, a way for the community to take its own temperature, and to blow off steam as required. It is a finger on the pulse of the very recent past, so some of its most salutary side effects have, in the distance of time, been outmoded or grown unnoticeable, irretrievable. In some cases the fun has lifted, like a mist, and all that remains is the poetry, or even the somber, or even the perverse or distressing. Sometimes we will find that what has risen off the top of the play is the theory that once animated it, and all that is left behind is a pretty balloon with no air inside.

In other examples, which stand for us as the best of the genre, the vivifying power of the immediate social scene has left a durable poetic work, which retains the imprint of its place of production while at the same time transcending it.

Rigorous amateurism. Under-rehearsedness. Minimal stage directions. Serious silliness. Counter-professionalism. Backstage open bar. Improvisation, ad-libs, unscripted laughter, mistakes & missed cues; in short, spontaneous life-art happening between the line readings.

Even if lines are memorized, it's still a staged reading.

No real actors. If a “real” actor appears in PT, it tends to make the audience blush on the actor's behalf. There shouldn't be trying, but being there doing it. Non-actors shouldn't be expected to play their role, but to play themselves performing their role.

For every performer, at least one friend in the audience.

PT should generally not be recorded. It's generally not pretty to look at on video, and the audience tends not to fit in the frame.

All PT video, film, or neo-benshi performances should aspire to be at least as interesting as you-tube.

PT tends to have a lot of in-jokes, and tends, for better or worse, to be oriented towards the coterie. Jokes in PT are funny mostly because the audience is laughing together. This is how coteries get to know themselves.

The broader the code, the wider the coterie.

The best poets theater would be everyday life, with each person playing themselves. Total coterie, with everyone in on the jokes. In short, spontaneous life-art happening between the players.