

**Festiva**

**2nd  
Annual**

**of Poets**



**Theater**

# Reflections on the Incomplete Project of Poets Theater

## Carla Harryman

### From the Grand Piano: An Experiment in Collective Autobiography, San Francisco,

### 1975-1980, Part 7. Detroit, Mode D, 2008

I think of Poets Theater of the late 70s and early 80s in San Francisco as representing two things: 1) in the climate of an emergent language-centered poetics; a practice of radical experiment that resulted in new theater and live performance art and/or presentations of mixed-media works with performance elements in an array of public and semi-public settings, including improvised lectures in art galleries or people's houses; theatrical productions in galleries or alternative art spaces and small theaters; the presentation of experimental words as critical lectures, preplanned interruptive theatrics in panel talk situations, co-presentations of poets and performance and conceptual artists' works in contexts that diminished the distinction between "poet and artist"; improvised events for no audiences on rooftops; readings in public spaces such as street corners and BART stations; visual and textual collaborations between writers and artists; elaborate poetry readings using visual aids, tape recording, music, and voice experiments; 2) a loosely configured ensemble of primarily untrained performers directed by Eileen Corder and Nick Robinson called the San Francisco Bay Area Poets Theater that produced works from about 1979 to 1986 and featured predominately non-narrative works of language-centered writers.<sup>1</sup>

Theater, performance art, and conceptualism intermingle in poets' performance activities and theatrics of that time. And although San Francisco Bay Area Poets Theater proper was more "theater" than performance art, many people recognized it as a hybrid of the two.

## Conceptualism

In the background of many writing, visual art, and performance activities of the 70s and 80s stands the influence of earlier conceptualists such as Sol Lewitt and Robert Smithson. Conceptualism's attention to materiality, frame, context, and space influences all the arts. The volatile art environment in which conceptual idiom could be flexibly engaged had an impact on writers working in various genres and across generations, including postmodern novelists Kathy Acker and Ronald Sukenick, the intermedia innovator Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and many if not all of the writers associated with Language writing. Here is a compilation of statements about conceptual art from a 1967 article by Sol Lewitt:

In conceptual art the idea of concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all typed of mental processes and it is purposeless. It is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman...It is the process of conception and realization with which the artist is concerned.<sup>2</sup>

The emphasis on process, on idea not as a theory to be proved, the interest in making mental processes a feature of the work, the emphasis on the mentality of the viewer of audience, the challenge to audience/viewer conditioning—many of Lewitt's tenets of conceptualism influenced a next generation of visual artists and were reflected in poets' performances on many levels.

However, and significantly, works with performative aspects complicate Lewitt's description. Seldom could the realization of a performance be perfunctory relative to its planning. Here I use two examples, one by Robert Smithson and the other by the San Francisco art collective T.R. Uthco.

Smithson is one of the most influential visual artists on Language writing. His significance for poets' performance involves his use of concept as an aspect of temporal processes. For instance, his earthworks intermingle concept, process, and performativity. They begin with a concept—such as pouring asphalt down a slope—that he meticulously plans and executes. Because he is using materials that behave in unpredictable manners, process mingles with concept. There are also performative aspects of the earthworks related to documentation and the presence of the artist as a visible participant in their execution.

In Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown* (1969), "a dump truck released a load of asphalt to flow down an eroded hillside in an abandoned section of a gravel and dirt quarry in Rome. The black viscous material merged with the hillside, [becoming] a grand tribute to entropy."<sup>3</sup> In this piece, one of several Smithson calls *Pours*, there exists a tension between the temporality involved in planning (of organizing the materials to make the pour) and the temporality of the "pour"—the execution of the event.

Something caustic or corrosive happens between the action performed, the asphalt gliding down the cliff, the film documentation of the event, and the experience of the viewer who, through the medium of the documentary, witnesses the event as "original and unique" even as it is a reproduction. These fabricated activities and imagined periods of time in which actual things occur reform, reanimate, and unsettle the work's meaning, even if its conceptual site is, in Nancy Holt's words, "entropy made visible." In Smithson's *Pours*, the processing of the "clock time" of the planning is placed in tension with a much eerier and more theatrical time. Meaning is suspended in a fantasy of geologic time destructively conjured by the displacements of original action through its mediated versions.

While pieces like Smithson's *Pours* provide a framework for thinking through questions of materiality and time within performance situations, the San Francisco artist collective T.R. Uthco shifts the "frame" of such interests from the geological site to social narrative. *The Eternal Frame* (1976), a reenactment of the assassination of John F. Kennedy that was realized on site in Dallas, offers a good example of postmodern storytelling that blurs the distinction between historical narrative, cultural construction, and performance.

Lucy Lippard identifies conceptual art with a diminishment of the value of material.<sup>4</sup> Materials become ephemeral mediums for ideas. Yet the diminishment of the value of materials paradoxically initiates an awareness of materiality. In engaging with a conceptual work, one might have the experience of looking at a penciled grid on a piece of paper: in recognizing the slightness of the material, one begins to engage with the concept. This paradox is played out in *The Eternal Frame*. The staged event is only a "copy" of the event that occurred, but it enlists a wide consideration of both ideas and material that lead up to and constitute the "real event." In performance, idea, material, and event do not have stable relationships one to another but are shown to be, in part, ideological, categories. The performative in art erodes the boundary between idea and material.

In reenacting the Kennedy assassination, T.R. Uthco's anti-illusionistic imitation documentary calls attention to televisual media's arbitration of history and its substantive contribution to the real event, which includes its form and narrative meaning. It reveals the media as the source for the "eternal frame" of the assassination. The performed reenactment of the assassination also draws attention to the materials of documentation, camera, film, angle, and point of view that convey the meaning of the tragedy to viewers. The actors appear in their costumes, they interview bystanders, the video camera is part of the scene, and the J.F.K. performer un-masks for the camera behind the scenes. The national event that had been transformed into a tradition of mythic dimension becomes subject to a collective critique.

Thus the "spoof," in drawing attention to its material construction, also evokes the constructed features of the original event and, through inference, the mediation/mediatization of both events. What's left out of the original version of the tragic event's representations becomes a ghostly presence in the reenactment. This would include the national agendas tied to Kennedy's legacy such as the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Vietnam War, both of which in being omitted from the eternal frame haunt it nonetheless in the figures of the young artists who have just recently lived through the Vietnam epoch and are now purposelessly masking as Kennedy, Jackie O., and their entourage. Conceptualism's purposelessness becomes also an affect of social history.

Calling attention to materials as a means of pointing to what is left out of a given scenario is a key feature of language-centered writing and a primary concern of Poets Theater. I wanted to make this aspect of the writing central to performance. The performer would be conceived as an instrument of the writing; the writing performed would in a sense become a character or occupy space in a sculptural manner. The displacement of language away from the body of the performer and onto the total scene of performance is what would lead me later to identify performers as "performing objects," a term conventionally reserved for puppets and props. In this scenario, both language and the performer are featured as materials of the total performance event.

The discrepant temporalities produced in conceptually inflected performance are similarly, if not identically, featured in Poets Theater. The time in which events occur becomes, in part, a function of the language of text as it is made to appear as emphatic (as opposed to natural) gesture and object in any given performance.

In discrete, partial, and absurd ways, my play *Third Man*, which on a double bill with Eileen Corder's *Mr. Sister*, ushered in Poets Theater at Studio Eremos in 1980, enacts an encounter with the politics of language of the post-Vietnam War period as these are interpreted by fantasy, literary idiom, references to popular culture, and gender politics. As a text, *Third Man* is quite different from T.R. Uthco's Kennedy assassination reenactment, because it forgoes or undoes the narratives presumed to be held in common among citizens subject to national discourses. What distinguished Poets Theater from performance art is its construction of an indeterminate world out of bits and pieces of language events that the performance itself and performers themselves have to interpret on its (their) own terms. Physical gesture in this context also radically differs from the imitative representations of visually based performance artists because it is drawn from an unknown or unidentifiable source or situation. It may achieve a kind of virtual autonomy, in the manner of language-centered writing.

**I do not claim that everything we do is entirely new. We are bound, consciously or unconsciously, to be influenced by the traditions, science and art, even by the superstitions and presentiments peculiar to the civilization which has moulded us.**

—Jerzy Grotowski

1. Event For Any Duration:  
Fake things.  
Emphasize the real time of the event.  
Nothing behind the acts.  
Notation cracks this open.  
Everything becomes *mise en scène*.  
Movement at the service of props.

2. Condensed Event:  
Reorganize the cadence of facts.  
Reveal a fascination for an assemblage of facts.  
Or the greedy way to take up space.  
Cite sources.

3. Just Act, Or Skip Over?  
How much activity is a lot of activity?  
Am I the source of it?  
Or the seven-year-old racing across the lawn followed by a flying insect?  
Can you identify a year for that event?  
The *Times*' photo of an outdoor market in Basra showing Iraqi women dressed from head-to-toe in black, June 2008?  
The events surrounding the frequency or infrequency and duration of any occurrence?  
Leaving the house?  
85 degrees Fahrenheit or 45 degrees Celsius?  
Returning?

# Writing Performance: Three Events

I am writing short pieces aimed at rehearsal situations, and the above bits are examples of this. Unlike my other writings for performance, the exercises above don't require vocalizing the words, even as speaking the text would be an option performers might choose. Performers might, for instance, take "nothing behind the acts" to be an instruction to invent a depthless scene. They could create this scene as silent action, and then they might choose to add to it "notation cracks this open" as a spoken line.

Like my other works for performance, these three exercises suggest an open-ended method of performing; the result can't be anticipated until decisions are made and provisional approaches are put into play in a rehearsal or performance situation. Metatheatrical, metatextual, and conceptual, the content is predominantly abstract, with enough references to concrete things in the last exercise, "Just Act or Skip Over?," to require a shift in thinking and focus. I have anticipated and then undermined the impulses I imagine might begin to establish themselves in the execution of the first two, more abstract, bits of the sequence. The three segments together are nevertheless related, if only because the are brought together in a sequence: the variation between the pieces will initiate an exploration of vocalizations and gestures related to the language of the text such as "fake things," "notation," "fascination," and "insect."

The four words/phrases I have selected constitute a nonnarrative sequence that indicates to a performer a concatenation of objects, activities, and states of mind. I could come up with quite a number of word lists that would suggest different ways to begin working with the text. I could, for instance, use another grouping to emphasize similarity in the vocabulary of the pieces, such as "notation,"

"movement," "cite," "skip," "frequency," "returning," which suggest musicality or physical movement. The rehearsal, then, could find direction in such a selection process: performers might orient themselves around words that evoke objects or tableaux. But my hypothetical ensemble might instead choose to take a more holistic approach to the segments and look for something that unifies the phrases of each exercise as the place to begin an exploration. Whatever the approach, the rehearsal will result in the rudiments of a collectively arrived-at language for performance. Undoubtedly dynamics of repetition, change, interaction, moving forward, cutting, composing, looking backward or around, and pausing will also serve as aspects of this foundational language.

The bringing into proximity of abstraction, representation, concept, and concrete detail as separate manipulable elements of a composition is a tactic that enables a writer to experiment with narrative and nonnarrative in the same piece. Nonnarrative can be exchanged for narrative and visa versa. In working this way, a writer might ask herself, What are the basic elements for animating a composition, and what elements are preestablished? Can medium and ground interpenetrate? Exchange places? The interplay between ground and medium is a performative site.

I don't have to tell a story to make a point.

**The story is an example of your point. An ugly howling face comes out of nowhere. It is artfully executed.**

What I want to point out here is a performative feature of my writing. Live performance and writing exist in proximity for me, but they are not the same thing. I am interested in the ways text and performance make contact with ensemble and rehearsal situations.

Returning to my exercises, I would imagine that the pieces would ring familiar chords for my hypothetical performers insofar as they reference, directly or indirectly, already existing methods and work. The first exercise, for instance, could refer (though not exclusively) to Rober Wilson's theater of mechanized props, as well as to any number of works by performance artists and conceptual sculptors in the 1970s. Yet, in our rehearsal, there might not be a need for props: the body could be a prop, or a performing object.

Carla Harryman is known for her genre-disrupting experimental performances and writings. Her many books include *Adorno's Noise* (Essay Press, 2008), *W--M--* (Split/Level 2013), *Baby* (Adventures in Poetry, 2005), *There Never Was a Rose Without a Thorn* (City Lights, 1995); experimental novels such as *Gardener of Stars* (Atelos 2002) and *The Words*, after Carl Sandburg's *Rootabaga Stories* and Jean-Paul Sartre (*O Books*, 1994); and the book-length poem *Open Box* (Belladonna, 2007). Critical writings include essays on innovative performance, gender, and postmodern literature. She co-edited *Lust for Life: On the Writings of Kathy Acker* (Verso 2006) and is editor of a special issue on "non/narrative," from *The Journal of Narrative Theory* (2011). Collaborations include *The Grand Piano* (Mode D, 2006-2010), an experiment in autobiography situated between 1975 and 1980 and authored by 10 writers identified with San Francisco language poetry; *The Wide Road* with Lyn Hejinian (Belladonna, 2011); and *Open Box*, a sound/music/text cd with Jon Raskin and the Jon Raskin Quartet (Tzadik 2012). *Gardener of Stars*, an Opera, for speaking voices, microelectronics, and prepared piano is her most recent collaboration with Raskin. In 2012 she presented *Occupying Theodore W. Adorno's Music and New Music*, a closing keynote performance for speaking voice (Harryman) and prepared piano (Magda Mayas) at dOCUMENTA 13. An innovator of poets theater, her avant-garde theater and polyvocal performance works have been presented in San Francisco, Detroit, Chicago, New York, Montreal, Auckland, the United Kingdom, Austria, and Germany. Sue in Berlin, a collection of performance writing and poets theater plays is forthcoming in French and English volumes from the To series of the University of Rouen Press in 2017. During the academic year, she serves as Professor of English Language and Literature at Eastern Michigan University, where she currently coordinates EMU's interdisciplinary creative writing program. She also serves on the MFA faculty of the Milton Avery School of the Arts at Bard College. She has received grants and awards from The Foundation for Contemporary Arts, Opera America: Next Stage, The Fund for Poetry, The Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation, and an NEA/New Langston Arts Consortium Playwright Commission.

1 San Francisco poets whose works were produced included Alan Bernheimer, Eileen Corder, Robert Harris, Carla Harryman, Bob Pirelman, Kit Robinson, and Stephen Rodeler; works by Jackson Mac Low also were staged.  
2 Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (1967), 79-84.  
3 Robert Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculptor* (Cornell UP, 1981), 174.  
4 Lucy Lippard, "Escape Attempts," in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972...* (Praeger, 1973), vii.  
5 "The idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious, and/or dematerialized."  
6 Jerzy Grotowski, *Toward a Poor Theater* (Routledge, 2002), 24.  
7 Carla Harryman, "Toy Boats," *Poetics Journal* 5, *Non/Narrative* (1985): 106.

W  
r  
t  
h  
e  
e



Two images provide a portal to the other side of the world. A lecture delivered in performative typing and voiceless montage.



Kevin B. Lee is a filmmaker and critic based in Chicago. He was named one of the Chicago New City Film 50 in 2013 and 2014. He received an MFA in Film Video New Media and Animation and an MA in Visual Studies from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.



The Living Theater's production of William Carlos Williams' *Many Loves* opened January 13, 1959 and ran in repertory along with Luigi Pirandello's *Tonight We Improvise*. Artistic Director Julian Beck writes that these works' play-within-a-play devices "made a direct attempt at involving the audience...To aid the audience to become once more what it was destined to be when the first dramas formed themselves on the threshing floor: a congregation led by priests, a choral ecstasy of reading and response... Not once, but often, people requested the money back at the box office because they had not come to see a bunch of people rehearsing; they wanted to see a show, the finished product." On the left is a young Martin Sheen.



*Ladies' Voices*, by Gertrude Stein, opened August 15, 1951, and was part of the Living Theater's debut program when in company at the Cherry Lane Theater. Beck said, "Our initial commitment was with form. That was why the first play we did was by Gertrude Stein. The work of Stein was attractive to us because it never ceased being part of the revolution of the word." On the right is Director and Playwright Judith Malina. Gordon Rogoff, on theater critic at the Village Voice, said of Malina, "Judith was a director with a difference -- tempting actors into a performance on behalf of the non-violent revolution she was always staging regardless of the material, the inspirations, the ideas, and the text. Yes, the text has to be remembered because that's where she and Julian began all their work: Gertrude Stein, poets..."

Selections from *Cosmological Plants*

# For Two Performers, Playback And Staging Michael Pisaro

Commissioned by the Festival of Poets Theater

**For instance one could immediately talk about drawings that include actors, actors in the widest sense, either from nature or also from the animal kingdom, plants or people, or also cosmological actors. One can only assess each thing by identifying what element is still missing.**

(from: *What is Art?: Conversations with Joseph Beuys*, p. 28)

The piece is in two acts with a pause and set change between them. The performers also change names in between the two acts.

Performer 1: Triangulum (Act I) – Andromeda 1 (Act II)  
Performer 2: Cassiopeia (Act I) – Andromeda 2 (Act II)

Each act is organized into a series of events, timed to coordinate with the backing track. The track itself will help control the durations of the events (perhaps along with timers places unobtrusively in the space to help guide the performers).

*Set Objects (and their locations on the grid):*

- (7b) Desk, chair, lamp, pencil paper.
- (6h) A plant sprayer, filled with water and a large sheet of paper (at 1 square meter), laid on the floor.
- (9h) A small cactus placed on the floor and a small speaker next to it.
- (8k) A bell suspended from some kind of percussion stand.
- (7n) Another bell (of a different sound and size) suspended from a percussion stand.
- (9t) A row of three suspended at head level. A vessel with which to water these plants (placed below)

- Act II:
- (7b) Desk, chair, lamp, pencil paper (same as in Act I)
- (6h) A large sheet of tin foil (at least 1 square meter), laid on the floor. A half-pound of white beans in a container, and a half-pound of millet in a container.
- (14l) An electric keyboard on a stand or a guitar in its case (at a slight angle)
- (13m) Chair (at a slight angle that allows keyboard or guitar to be played.)
- (1n) A bed of some kind with a large white sheet over it.
- (10p) A floor tom or bass drum with a soft beater
- (9t) Plants as in act one. Each plant has a different colored spotlight on it: Green, Blue, Red respectively.

Act 1 (eight minutes)  
*Daytime lighting.*  
Event 1 (0:00–1:00)  
*Backing track starts with high sounds. No movement.*  
Event 2 (1:00–3:00) (simultaneous actions)  
*Triangulum:*

# In My Sights, Sister Rachel Galvin

From *Lost Property Unit*,  
forthcoming from  
Green Lantern Press

My eyes are polished smooth by sight, they clot like crystals in storm glass,  
like my sister brewing beakers of toxin. If we had seen  
what had been done, what the helicopter pilot did in our name,  
what the special ops team did in our name, what they did  
with their hands in our name. If we had seen with our own smooth eyes.  
Mark the diacritical, my lovely: we're all wearing our knee-high boots,  
every last one of us, we live in a booted nation. A nation girded and gunning.

This moment, this is precisely all, watching takes work, sight takes hours,  
takes my eyeglasses, every last one of them, as if they were yours. You can see  
there's a sigh in our sight. What if it were my sister? What if it were,  
what. The catchword if you can, a sure eye keeps the engine running.  
What we saw ground into our eyes with the photos, with the newspaper reports,  
carved out our ears with the radio stories. What would I say,  
what can I say if, it were my sister, my own? With my own beakers  
of toxin, my own boots, my own hands in my own name?

Rachel Galvin is the author of a book of poems, *Pulleys & Locomotion* (Black Lawrence), and a chapbook, *Zestrope* (Châtaro Editores), and translator of Raymond Queneau's *Hitting the Streets* (Carcanel), which won the Scott Moncrieff Prize for French Translation. Her poems and translations appear in journals such as *Boston Review*, *Chicago Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Drunken Boat*, *Gulf Coast*, *McSweeney's*, *The New Yorker*, *PN Review*, and *Poetry*. A new collection of poems, *Lost Property Unit*, was a finalist for the National Poetry Series and Alice James Books' Kinereth Gensler Award. Galvin is an assistant professor in the Department of English at the University of Chicago.

Michael Pisaro is a guitarist, composer and a member of the Wandelweiser collective. His music is performed frequently in concerts and festivals around the world. Recordings of his work (solo and collaborative) have been released by Edition Wandelweiser Records, erstwhile records, New World Records, another timbre, slubmusic, Cathnor, Senofo Editions, winds measure, HEM Berlin and on Pisaro's own imprint, Gravity Wave. Before joining the composition faculty at the California Institute of the Arts, he taught composition and theory at Northwestern University.

*Writing at the table. Pencil on paper is audible. Murmurs the text, semi-intelligibly as he writes. Pauses as he looks periodically into space, apparently listening.*

This table does not stand by itself. It takes its place in a chain of connected objects with invisible lines drawn from it to others, like the walking lines of the constellations.

Our separateness is a projection from the web of myth.

I am invisibly tied to the chair upon which I sit. It's hard to get up. Perhaps I am being punished for thinking more about myself and less about my connection to you.

The bright W of asters is in a compact with the nearby delta. We have spent twenty-five centuries in the canopy of the nighttime sky.

*Cassiopeia: The Rilke paraphrase text (spoken aloud, standing):*

The stars are always falling from a great distance, like asters falling in the distant garden of heaven, they fall with a declining gesture.

a shake of the head. *(slow head shake)* hand in front of the face. *(right hand, palm inward, blocks face and then moves away)*

Every night the earth falls away from the starts; gravity is lonely.

We fall. All of us fall, like my hands fall. *(Arms above head.)*

Look at my hand fall. *(Right arm falls gently.)*

Now look at the other; it's alone. *(Left arm falls gently)*

Nothing stops us from falling, there is no one there to catch the us, no infinitely soft landing in the palm of a hand.

POWERS

INDIVIDUALS  
SIGHTS

POWERS

# Note from the Curators: Patrick Durgin and Devin King

Second Annual Festival of Poets Theater

This project is made possible in part by support from the National Performance Network (NPN) Performance Residency Program. For more information: [www.npnweb.org](http://www.npnweb.org).



kenningeditions

Links Hall  
[www.linkshall.org](http://www.linkshall.org)

Poets theater is a genre of porous borders, one that emerges about the same time, and involving many of the same artists, as performance art, performance poetry (“spoken word”), conceptual and “intermedia” art. But poets have long been playwrights, either primarily (Sophocles, Shakespeare) or as a platform for postmodern literary experimentation (the operas and page plays of Gertrude Stein, for example). If poetry can most specifically be called, in the words of David Antin, “the language art,” the collusion of linguistic media and dance, performance, music, and the visual/plastic arts might also fall under the purview of poetics as a theater of experiment that may or may not have to do with the genre “drama” as it is traditionally and persistently defined (think of Simone Forti’s collaborations with Charlemagne Palestine or Jackson Mac Low, or Adam Pendleton’s “Black Dada” performances generated in tandem to his privately circulating anthology and publicly exhibited paintings of the same name). Although recognized by two anthologies—Sarah Bay-Cheng and Barbara Cole’s *Poets at Play* and Kevin Killian and David Brazil’s *Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater*—it wasn’t since Michael Benedikt’s *Theatre Experiment* in 1967 that the wider scope of pertinent work to fall under this rubric was fully acknowledged. If poets theater is a form of sociability, page play, agitprop, or post-dramatic theatre, fully distinct disciplinary boundaries have internally divided it as a field, and dispersed our knowledge and the influence of its practitioners.

But, a tentative taxonomy can be attempted. There are several subgenres of poets theater that have emerged in recent years, all with links to the longer history of the form. Though that history is much longer (ancient, in fact), by the first years of the 21st century, three approaches were visible, and each is represented in this year’s programming. On one hand, you have an operatic approach, taken by Carla Harryman. Harryman’s poets theater work has always involved collaboration, improvisation, and a process-oriented production approach. She deliberately pairs theater people with poets, both of these with visual artists (on set work), and all with musicians who sometimes burst into the scene, rather than merely composing for it. And then there is the coterie approach, which has been a local tradition in San Francisco poets theater for years, under the auspices of Kevin Killian’s work with Small Press Traffic’s “Poets Theater Jamboree,” an annual festival. Here the script is held in hand, rehearsal is practically avoided, and the writing is foregrounded in hilarious and often unique ways. Much has been written about the willful amateurishness of this approach, which ought to remind us that the root of “amateur” is the root of “amity,” friendship, love, and community. And third, there is a neo-benshi approach that more and more folds in lessons from performance art proper. Kevin B. Lee and Jennifer Tamayo incorporate elements of benshi (or “moving talking”) through their use of video and live “voice-over.”

The Second Annual Festival of Poets Theater aims to investigate (and explode) these categories with performances, screenings and readings over four nights, plus an afternoon of talks on the genre and salient examples of it. The first iteration of the festival, in late 2015, featured the work of three generations of writers and artists, including screenings of work by Eleanor Antin and the infamous production of Kathy Acker’s *Birth of the Poet* in 1985. Avery Young reset Amiri Baraka’s 1968 play “Home on the Range” in reference to #Blacklivesmatter. Heidi Bean, John Beer, and Carla Harryman gave talks on poets theater. And Patrick Durgin explored contemporary debates in performance reenactment while paying homage to Scott Burton and Judith Malina. Others worked with reference to Isadora Duncan and Seneca. The festival’s offerings ranged from Neo-Benshi (film-talking), performative lecture, and experimental re-enactment of a “talk poem” disrupted by hecklers. We aim to maintain the scope of the festival while pushing against axiomatic discernments between text and context, circumstance and production, and obviously those between genre and praxis. Throughout, the fest asks: How does Poets Theater integrate the usually solitary research practice of the poet into the ecstatically open site of the theater? How does performance “do” poetry, and how does it replicate poetry’s gestural openness? And what are the outer reaches of these theatrical gestures; how does Poets Theater fold into dance, painting, sculpture, music, and even back into poetry?

Patrick Durgin is the author of *PQRS* (Kenning Editions, 2013) and *The Route* (with Jen Hofer, Atelos, 2008). His artist book *Zenith* was published by Green Lantern Press in the spring of 2016. The Volta published “Prelude to PQRS,” a reflection on his work in poets theater originally presented at the New [New] Corpse event series. His performance piece *Interference* was featured in the 2015 Festival of Poets Theater. He is currently writing two books: a critical biography of Jackson Mac Low and Hannah Weiner and a collection of poetry. He edits the non-fiction series *Ordinance* for Kenning Editions, an independent press he founded in 1998. He teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Devin King is the co-director of Sector 2337 and the poetry editor for the Green Lantern Press. He teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

NOTE

from

On Shelves  
October/  
November  
2016

The Green  
Lantern Press



[press.thegreenlantern.org](http://press.thegreenlantern.org)

