

ANTHSLIDE
by Steve Evans

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American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders. Ed. Eliot Weinberger. New York: Marsilio, 1993. 433 pages. \$19.95.

The Art of Practice: 45 Contemporary Poets. Ed. Dennis Barone and Peter Gannick. Elmwood, Ct.: Potes & Poets, 1994. 384 pages. \$18.

From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry, 1960-1990. Ed. Douglas Messerli. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1994. 1135 pages. \$29.95.

o•blek 12: Writing from the New Coast (Spring/Fall 1993). Ed. Peter Gizzi, Connell McGrath, and Juliana Spahr. 2 vols, 530 pages. \$14.95.

Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology. Ed. Paul Hoover. New York: Norton, 1994. 701 pages. \$19.95.

By 1926 Gertrude Stein had already identified the essential dynamic governing the reception of experimental writing. "For a very long time," she writes, "everybody refuses and then almost without a pause almost everybody accepts. In the history of the refused in the arts and literature the rapidity of the change is always startling."

The 1993-94 publishing season marks such a moment of rapid and startling change. In the span of a few months, a half-century of "refused" poetry has made its way, if not into universal acceptance, then at least into significantly increased accessibility. The agents of that change: five anthologies, published by presses as divergent as Marsilio, Sun & Moon, Norton, Potes & Poets, and o•blek. With a collective page count pushing 3000, and a combined roster of 288 authors, the sheer scale of these collections is enough to startle anyone accustomed to tracking the cutting edge of poetic practice through magazines with circulation lists of a hundred people, books brought out in editions of 1000 and gone out of print in an instant, or smudged xeroxes of poems that can't get printed at

all. The latter have indeed been the basic units of reception for many of the authors collected in these five volumes, and doubtless such inconspicuous venues will continue to be the primary sites where poetic innovation—released from any imperative but that of composition itself—will occur in the foreseeable future. But for the moment, a difficult transition is being attempted, one we might characterize as a shift from a market primarily of producers (other poets) to a market of consumers (literate citizens, students, cultural producers in adjacent fields). In light of this attempt, the choice of the anthology—an established form for mediating between producers and consumers—makes sense even as it entails serious compromises.

Let us agree that anthologies are acts of composition in themselves and that as such they propose a relationship to the congealed history we call “form.” If there is one cause for disappointment with the current batch of anthologies—and here I speak especially of the retrospective volumes, i.e. those from Marsilio, Norton, and Sun & Moon—it lies in the complacent approaches the various editors adopted with respect to the anthology as a unit of composition in its own right. Too little is done to disrupt the atomism and chronologism (i.e. the bureaucracy of proper-name and birthdate) that are conventional to the form and that tend to make anthologies into exemplary sites of what Walter Benjamin referred to as “empty, homogeneous time.” The virtue of empty, homogenous time is that elements are infinitely recombinable within it, but this virtue comes at the cost of draining practice of its stakes as well as standardizing its variable durations. The eerie stillness of arrested labor, passed off as an index of eternal literary value by Paul Hoover’s predecessors at Norton, may be the time to which readers of StateName Review are accustomed, but in a tradition that looks to Stein’s Making of Americans and Stanzas in Meditation for precedent, and that includes as a crucial possibility the open durations of John Cage’s “lectures,” Bernadette Mayer’s Memory, Ron Silliman’s Tjanting, Lyn Hejinian’s My Life, and Charles Reznikoff’s Testimony (to name just a few examples), accepting the anthology as a machine built to normalize and neutralize time is problematic at best. At worst, it represents the forfeiture of the very project of formal radicality that

distinguishes the work of the writers collected here from that of their conformist and opportunist counterparts in the realm of acceptable verse.

The wager made by the editors of these collections is that their compromises will pay off in an expanded, and perhaps eventually a transformed, audience for formally radical poetic practice. The prospect is indeed compelling enough to warrant considerable risks—especially at a moment when independent presses and distribution networks are becoming harder and harder to sustain in the face of conservative patterns of government funding and systematic shut-out from corporate bookstores. That you can, at the time of this writing, actually walk into a North American bookstore and encounter something strongly resembling a “choice” on the poetry shelves—at least in the anthology section—is a good that I for one find it difficult to second-guess. Not only is there currently an accessible alternative to the anemic array of corporate and university press books, there are even alternatives within the alternative.

Paul Hoover’s Norton anthology, Postmodern American Poetry, is at once the most lucid and the most cautious of the collections. It does least by way of radicalizing the anthology-form, but it nevertheless surpasses its narrowly pedagogical mission and academic target market by virtue of its ample range of authors (103 in all), its excellent and concise introductions, and its inclusion of an important section of poetics at the end of the volume. If Hoover’s book is “Intro to PoMo” material, Douglas Messerli’s Sun & Moon anthology, From the Other Side of the Century, is destined for the “advanced” class. Almost twice as long as the Norton (you may be reading it well into the next century in fact), the Sun & Moon volume provides larger and less obvious selections from 81 authors. Messerli’s patient and urbane editorial strategies sometimes veer into the idiosyncratic (cf. the very poor selection of Frank O’Hara’s work), but more often they permit a sustained and complicated portrait of a given author’s project to emerge. Whereas Hoover is apt to concentrate on “signature” pieces—a few sections from Hejiniian’s My Life, or a cluster of lyrics from Creeley’s early work—Messerli is not constrained by “teachability” and can therefore offer the more multifaceted version, in Hejiniian’s case providing excerpts from a half-dozen works ranging from the 1977 Mask of Motion to the 1991 Oxota: A

Short Russian Novel, in Creeley's focusing on the 1967 collection Words but including work from seven other volumes, with publication dates ranging between 1962 and 1991, as well.

Hoover's anthology evokes the classroom and Messerli's evokes the environs of an urban intelligentsia (perhaps with institutional affiliations, perhaps not). Eliot Weinberger's Marsilio collection, American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders, differs from both in its insistent thematization of precapitalist and noncapitalist spaces. If you can forgive the primitivist and misogynist impulses of the ethno- and mytho-poetic projects favored by Weinberger (and I am not recommending that you should), this volume will probably hold your interest. Composed as it is around recurrent figures of festivity, grace, cross-cultural contact, and human reconciliation with nature, it repays cover-to-cover, sequential reading in a way that neither the Hoover nor Messerli volumes do, and if the odd conjunction of criteria employed by Weinberger—publication date after 1950, birthdate before 1945—lends the volume a curiously "middle-aged male" texture (only 15% of the work was written by a poet in their 30s or younger!), it also works to undermine the stereotyped association of linguistic experimentation with acts of a rash youth, sooner or later recanted.

As distinct as the three editorial projects sketched above are, the near-simultaneity of their appearance and the many points of overlap between them raises the possibility of interpreting them as a single text comprised of partially reinforcing, partially interfering patterns. Seeing them as such actually restores some of the lively contentiousness that each separate anthology lacks. It also suggests which "careers" (if that word can be retained to describe something as singular as a given author's trajectory through the autonomous regions of the poetic field) are currently thought to have produced decisive effects in the field—that is, to have altered the way poetry is practiced, either by opening or significantly extending a viable and distinctive position. Predictably, the weave of this macro-anthology is densest and most durable the further back in time you go. Eight poets from Donald Allen's New American Poetry(Grove)—John Ashbery, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, Frank

O'Hara, Charles Olson, and Jack Spicer—form the stable matrix where the Norton, Sun & Moon, and Marsilio collections converge. (Nothing too risky here: with the exception of Spicer, these poets had all made it into the Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry co-edited in 1973 by Richard Ellman and Robert O'Clair.) Five poets who emerged later in the 60s also survived all three editorial processes: David Antin, John Cage, Robert Kelley, Jackson Mac Low, and Jerome Rothenberg. Finally, three poets who established their reputations in the 70s—Clark Coolidge, Michael Palmer, and Susan Howe—round out the editorial consensus.

The next greatest incidence of overlap occurs between the Norton and Sun & Moon anthologies, neither of which stipulated the same pre-WWII birthdate requirement imposed by Weinberger. In addition to the names already mentioned, thirtyone more poets made both Hoover's and Messerli's cut. The overwhelming majority of these are drawn from one of two collective formations: the New York School—Ted Berrigan, Joseph Ceravalo, Kenward Elmslie, John Godfrey, Barbara Guest, Bernadette Mayer, Charles North, Alice Notley, Ron Padgett, James Schuyler, Lorenzo Thomas, Marjorie Welish—on the one hand, and Language-centered writing—Bruce Andrews, Rae Armantrout, Charles Bernstein, Michael Davidson, Ray DiPalma, Bob Grenier, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Bob Perelman, Ron Silliman, Rosmarie Waldrop, Diane Ward, Barrett Watten and Hannah Weiner—on the other. Mayer and Coolidge are the key figure in this overlap (witness their status as newcomers in the Anthology of New York Poetry co-edited by Ron Padgett and David Shapiro in 1970; their status as elders in Ron Silliman's 1986 In the American Tree), while Lorenzo Thomas and Clarence Major occupy along with Jones/Baraka the space where the Black Arts Movement sometimes intersected with the second generation New York School. Three West Coast poets defying easy characterization in terms of group alliance—Larry Eigner, Nate Mackey, and Leslie Scalapino—fill out this second zone of interwoven poetic projects.

Once these connections have been mentioned the terrain becomes more varied. The Sun & Moon and Marsilio anthologies overlap on only five additional writers: Ronald Johnson (the better selection from whose long

work Ark is provided by Weinberger) and the Objectivist poets Lorine Neidecker, George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, and Louis Zukofsky (Messerli also includes the other writer most often associated with Objectivist poetics, Carl Rakosi, whom Weinberger omits). The Norton and Marsilio volumes concur on Paul Blackburn, Clayton Eshleman, Denise Levertov, Gary Snyder, and Gustaf Sobin. And after that the collections drift out of synch. In fact, of the 146 authors presented in these three anthologies, 89 (that is, about 40%) appear in only one of them. Just about half of the authors in Hoover's collection do not appear in the two other anthologies (though many do appear in Andrei Codrescu's 1987 Up Late: American Poetry Since 1970, indicating that Hoover turned to Codrescu's collection for a precedent). Among the writers that appear only in the Norton there are such New American Poetry alumnae as Kenneth Koch, Ed Dorn, Jack Kerouac, Phillip Whalen, and Gregory Corso; poets associated with the New York School such as David Shapiro, Anne Waldman, Harry Matthews, Tony Towle, and Bill Berkson; and a host of others that includes Keith Waldrop, John Yau, Victor Hernández Cruz, Eileen Myles, and Charles Bukowski. Just a shade more than a third of the authors in Messerli's anthology don't appear elsewhere, some examples being Robin Blaser, David Bromige, Fanny Howe, Kit Robinson, Alan Davies, Steve Benson, and Jean Day. Finally, about a quarter of the authors in Weinberger's volume don't appear in the other two: in addition to Williams, Pound, and H.D.—the "great modernists" with whom Weinberger opens his collection—this list includes Langston Hughes, Muriel Rukeyser, William Everson and William Bronk.

I set this dance of names in motion to indicate, however abstractly, that certain consistencies as well as certain exclusivities crystallize as Hoover, Messerli, and Weinberger retrospectively compose the field of post-1950 poetry. The Art of Practice: 45 Contemporary Poets, edited by Dennis Barone and Peter Gannick for Potes & Poets Press, participates to some degree in this project of retrospection, but it makes an intervention of a different order from that of the other three collections. One of the central developments visible in both the Norton and Sun & Moon anthologies is clearly the "legitimation" of Language-centered writing (aka L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry, aka Social Formalism, etc.). While news of

this collective formation has only recently drawn within earshot of academia (on this metaphor you can perhaps think of Hoover and Messerli's anthologies as hearing-aids), the fusion of social and linguistic radicalism that characterized the movement between 1973-1983 has by now been extensively interrogated both from within the project (track down, if you are able, some of Alan Davies's reviews written under the running title of "Peer Pleasure") and by writers positioned either by age or inclination outside of—but in dialogue with—the project. What Barone and Gannick attempt is to give some indication of where that dialogue stands today, and, in the process, to simultaneously complete and exceed the editorial projects of two earlier movement anthologies, Silliman's In the American Tree (1986) and Messerli's "Language" Poetries (1987).

Samplings from Jerry Estrin's Rome, A Mobile Home (published jointly by Figures/O Books/Potes & Poets/Roof in 1993) and from Dodie Bellamy's ongoing experiment in epistolary form, The Letters of Mina Harker, represent the best this collection has to offer. Whereas the work of a Daniel Davidson or Jeff Derkson (two promising writers associated with the Kootenay School of Writing in Vancouver) somewhat dutifully reproduce the "slogans without a movement" paradigm of advanced political irony inaugurated by Bruce Andrews and Bob Perelman, Estrin constructs a "counter song" less eager to abdicate its humanity for a laugh-line. Compare this passage by Estrin— "A man is dancing to static or he is being shot. // Our static is rich / a point of view / Your point of view doesn't belong to you. // Humans are traitors to their species. / Random violets in the park. / Park a premeditated park" (172)—to one by Davidson: "Now that we've got the facts straight, we can proceed to telling lies outright. Beginning with the myth of the disenfranchised, class-based analysis is defunct as socialism in the twenty-first century and beyond. Remember you are an individual, and as such the holder of a vast cavity of well-defined rights and responsibilities. Let's go to a fern barn, and munch our way back to your apartment" (37). In its haste to demonstrate immunity from key ideologemes of chronic capitalism (individualism, the disavowal of class), the passage from Davidson's An Account settles for a rudimentary game of ironic reversal that a reader can play without becoming implicated. By contrast, Estrin's lyric is not afraid of the tendentious ("Your

point of view doesn't belong to you"), but neither does it apply irony as a curative balm meant to take the sting off the frequently lethal contradictions of capitalist society.

Likewise Dodie Bellamy's refusal of the settled abstractions with which many of the contributors to the Art of Practice stock their (by now not so) "new" sentences. Bellamy moves at a hectic pace through a spectrum of referential possibilities and sharply positioned statements, creating in passages such as the following a field of determinate forces and subtly shaded negations:

The gallbladder is rancid, the heart scorched, the spleen is fragrant and sweet, the large intestine or lung is rotten. The man on the bus stinks of shit a disturbance in identity, system, order has he rolled in it or are these his insides seeping into the mass transit atmosphere, mingling with gasoline and tired perfume. I cover my nose and squint my eyes the body dissolves in language salt on a slug the skin talks, and says I'VE HAD ENOUGH I want X but I do not intend to do it / I want X but I am not doing it / I do X (in fantasy) but I do not (actually) do it / I want X but I do not want it.... (119)

This is atypical of the ample selection of work taking the sentence as its unit of construction in the Art of Practice. More typical is the following extract from Johanna Drucker's "Deterring Discourse," a work whose clearly oppositional intent (its genre is the dystopia) is inscribed in—and to my mind, defused by—the monotonous syntax of its bitter aphoristic statements.

The unsaid, the uninvited, and the incorrect: all cast out of the social network. The forms of transgression are permitted to make their own fashion statement. Time after time they date each other, closing in. The tightening circle of dead silence paralyzes the facts. Her dreams are scattered before they are spent. The bank account of rugged individualism had closed. The fertile waters of revenge rose to stamp the woman's face in the shape of a grin. The program had been aborted, but not its effects. The epistemological formulae threw the happy days of ancient childhood up to mock her. The open marketplace for the exchange of sentences was shut in her face. (177)

Drucker's autopsy of the social body unfolds with relentless clarity. One recognizes, even in the absence of further specification, the overarching accuracy of statements such as "[t]he program had been aborted, but not its effects." But Bellamy's is the riskier and more interesting diagnosis. Whereas Drucker eliminates the margin of subjectivity, Bellamy—like Estrin—complicates it, and in doing so identifies utopic potentials such as those stored in fantasy rather than conceding dystopia as "all that is the case."

But to return to comments of a more general order. Spare on apparatus, the Art of Practice reads as much like a magazine issue as it does an anthology. Barone and Gannick present between four and fourteen page selections for each author (the average is eight), and emphasize work composed and published in the 90s (in fact many of the excerpts bear 1994 copyrights). Their choice of authors overlaps with the new Sun & Moon anthology on Abigail Child, Steve McCaffery, Douglas Messerli, Joan Retallack, Leslie Scalapino, Aaron Shurin, John Taggart, and Fiona Templeton—and, to a lesser extent, with the Norton—Mei Mei Berssenbrugge, Elaine Equi, Kathleen Fraser, and Scalapino. Ron Silliman's afterword to the volume is noteworthy for its hyperbolic opening sentences: "It should be writ large, for all to see: we in North America are living in a poetic renaissance unparalleled in our history. The riches of this book make the case" (emphasis original). Where Silliman posits "riches" evenly distributed throughout the volume, I see something more like the results of an interesting but noticeably uneven development—there are instances where the energy seems entirely drained from devices that a decade ago were undeniably innovative and generative, and these are juxtaposed (sometimes within a single author's work) with instances of compositional practice that not only are as vivid and committed as anything in In the American Tree but that also look forward to new possibilities in an environment where Language-centered writing is an accomplished fact and everyone seems most anxious to know: what happens next?

The atmosphere of expectancy—one might almost say of impatience—surrounding this question has certainly colored the reception of the one collection under review here that does not position itself as an

anthology, but rather as a provisional assemblage of work by emerging writers. Where the other collections totalize, o•blek 12: Writing from the New Coast tantalizes—there are 119 poets in the 334 page “Presentation” volume co-edited by Peter Gizzi and Connell McGrath, and the companion volume of poetics edited by Gizzi and Juliana Spahr, “Technique,” presents 94 statements in just under 200 pages. Given that few of the writers assembled in these volumes are more than one or two books into their writing careers (many have not yet had even a first book), the primary value of the New Coast is as an index of poets to look out for in the coming years of independent magazine and press publication. While the short selections—only 24 contributors to the “Presentation” volume are represented by more than 3 pages of work—sometimes make it hard to form a definite impression of a writer’s range of formal and thematic commitments, the two volumes taken in combination do provide basic coordinates that serve to locate many of the poets whose work is currently appearing in magazines as Apex of the M, Arras, Avec, Big Allis, Black Bread, Chain, The Impercipient, Mirage #4, Object, Situation, Talisman, Torque (the list goes on).*

The New Coast is a directory—by no means exhaustive, but so far the only one we have—of writers to whom the task has fallen of reinventing poetic practice for a new set of conditions and in light of a now codified and anthologized tradition of experimentation. No single position has as yet decisively emerged from the tumult of possibility, no one “movement” has yet differentiated itself from the commotion. But in the months since o•blek 12 appeared (it is at the time of this writing a handful of copies shy of going out of print), the commotion has intensified and positions have proliferated. There is underway another of the century’s prodigious interrogations of the shapes and stakes of poetry—what remains to be seen is whether something other than the innocuous embrace of the anthologist awaits its results.

Note

* It should be said that many of the contributors to the New Coast (including this reviewer) participated in a festival of the same name held at SUNY Buffalo in the early spring of 1993. The four-day event featured readings by 32 poets (many more if one counts the nightly Salons des

Refusés) and a half-dozen panel discussions. For participant-accounts of the event, check out Chris Stroffolino in Lingo 2 (1993), Joe Ross in El-E-Phant (August 1993), and Tony Door in The Poetry Project Newsletter (#151 Oct/Nov. 1993 and #152 Dec 1993/Jan 1994). I provided a brief introduction to the "Technique" volume, so my standpoint is also that of a participant-observer.