

see to see —

**NIKKI REIMER:** *Finding the world: George Stanley's North of California St.*

George Stanley's *North of California St.: Selected Poems 1975 – 1999* is a selection from the four books Stanley wrote as he moved from San Francisco to Vancouver in 1971, Vancouver to Terrace, BC, in 1976, and during trips to Ireland, his ancestral home.

Covering a twenty-four year period in Stanley's writing life, *North of California St.* is suffused with a pervasive sense of loss: parents die, friends die, cities are left in the past. In Ireland he finds "[t]houghts of death walking through old oak wood" (168). An earlier poem, memorializing Catherine Hennessey (Sister Maureen), speaks of people "still alive...in San Jose (& they are dead & live in this poem)" (31). This seeming paradox recurs throughout the book: death and life side by side, funeral mass next to verdant orchards.

Each poem grapples with local history, politics, and relationships. As Sharon Thesen writes in "George Stanley's North," the book's introductory essay, Stanley is concerned with the poetics of "Aboutism." I would further suggest that this volume encapsulates the "Affect of Aboutism" or the affect that is produced by the layers of ruminative discourse in Stanley's essay-poems. His narrative meanderings mimic the melancholia of the British Columbia landscape: "[g]laciers in the arms of trees" (92). In fact, the recurrent tone in the volume is on the depressive end of the scale: "Vancouver in April" is "shitty...heart too bleak for self pity" (50). In "My New Past," the speaker laments the slip of memory, mental snapshots of places which are now themselves "gone." "Where is North Central B.C., / August, 1982, at this hour?" (116). Elsewhere he writes "[i]f this is the world, then where am I, / what is this loneliness, this outpost?" (69).

There are echoes of Duncan and Spicer throughout the collection, especially in the earlier works, drawn from Stanley's time with the San Francisco Renaissance poets. Later, a very British Columbian concern with labour politics comes to the fore. "The Set" memorializes the crew on a typesetting gig, "we were for real—& we were dirty" (57).

In each volume of *North of California St.*, Stanley writes a poetry of place. He writes the isolation of the north, where to the literati the word “Terrace” denotes “marginal.” How does one find “world & meaning / outside your mind?” (58) *North of California St.* is a record of Stanley’s lifelong poetic engagement with these concerns, as he records a poet’s daily life, his search for meaning that is internal as well as external. He writes what he sees, what he thinks about it, how he feels. He meditates, he contemplates, he grumbles. His poems are melancholy, wry, rueful, stout, and fierce. They inhabit the world. “Poem goes on, world goes on” (74).

## MONROE LAWRENCE: I Know It’s Hard To Understand

When I first encountered Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* a few terms into the undergraduate degree I am currently months from finishing, I remember asking myself, of the intimate readerly address which also closes Ben Lerner’s second novel 10:04: Why haven’t I seen more writers doing this?

It avails not, neither time or place—distance avails not;  
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many  
generations hence;  
I project myself—also I return—I am with you, and I know how it is.

The speech act was so earnest (Whitman’s total belief in his ability to address us from beyond his life) that I couldn’t help feeling moved by the intensity of having been implicated in those pronouns: You feel, impossibly, as if *you are that you*. But surely we don’t encounter this intimacy very often because it is, you know, rather difficult to pull off. What is powerful about the above passage is not the mere notion that a poet would endeavour to speak beyond his death—poetry often describes itself as this endeavour. Instead, the passage works because Whitman was a student of poetic form, a craftsman whose prosody would spawn half of American letters. Much of 10:04 feels this way—as if it shouldn’t work, but does—and due to this incongruence I have no interest in describing its plot to you. In fact, I can’t help wishing this review could hold the symbolic weight of having been written by someone of great stature, so I could simply say that 10:04 is gorgeous, hilarious, a technology of unparaphraseable solace. Over and against this century’s

short-term and Netflixish escapisms, *10:04* was genuinely consoling to me regarding issues which occur every day, phenomena which until *10:04* struck me as my own private damage. I don't care if you "can't stand metafiction," another white girl resenting another white man. Lerner is not some oblique poet-critic deploying updated academic postmodernisms—he is an immensely compassionate artist working very hard in order to communicate with you. I'm not sure why we are still hearing phrases like "a work of endless relevance" from Rachel Kushner, regarding Lerner or anyone's book. After Kushner, Lerner is the most important working American novelist, a poet whose formal ambition and rigorous commitment to the arts permit him to confront our generation's manifest complexities with the tremendous attention they entail. The last ten pages of *10:04* conjured for me the 'welling' sensation I generally attribute to music, a tingling in those rhythms as they moved in something's direction. "Reader, we walked on," Lerner writes, and it doesn't feel silly; it feels like Whitman, like singing. "I know it's hard to understand," but by the time *10:04* is over, its final iambs feel charged, the novel up to now performing testimony to their accuracy: "I am with you, and I know how it is." Can I make this any clearer? I believe Lerner actually achieves the intimacy of Whitman's address. Think of the news anchors who are constantly mentioning us 'viewers at home'—it always feels like they are talking about someone else. Well, *10:04* isn't "about" anything. But I swear I felt it was talking to me.

Ben Lerner, *10:04* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2014).

## CHELSEA ROONEY: Margaux Williamson: *I Could See Everything*

The title alone—*I Could See Everything*—evokes a sense of wonder. Imagine, what you would see, if you could see everything. As teachers, we ask students to use the conditional with caution. The reader must know whether you speak in fact or in the hypothetical. Watch for the gap, we warn, between what you *could* see and what you *did* see.

In good faith, we do not ask the same of artists. We maintain that gap for works like *I Could See Everything*. A fictional art gallery (The Road at the Top of the World Museum) and its able curator (AGO's Ann Marie Peña) exhibit forty-six



new paintings by Margaux Williamson. Docent Mark Greif guides us through each gallery. Critics provide reviews. The artist gives an interview and, finally, in the last section, we can ferret her source materials, sketches, and text sketches. The book is an exhibition, reception, and retrospective in one. We can see everything.

The book jacket (a detail from *At night I painted in the kitchen*) hints that perhaps everything is not all it's cracked up to be. Williamson's everything might be drab. Quotidian and aging. Broad brushstrokes give a thumbled, illegible newspaper. Bananas past their prime. Empty beer bottles. Is this everything?

In the book's interview between Williamson and Chris Kraus, the artist talks about Nietzsche's principle of Eternal Return: the idea that though time is infinite, events are not. Combinations occur and repeat forever. "I was looking around at what I could see from where I was standing—the banality, the meaning or meaninglessness of everything." Later, in a text sketch, she writes by hand: "Marcel Duchamp 'Whether you paint or not it is the same thing.'"

The Eternal Return terrified Nietzsche. It drove him to outdo morality in a sort of hero's quest for wholeness. For Williamson, her consideration of the Eternal Return may have the converse effect. Her paintings show a sedulous contemplation of morality, and they do so through the fragmentation of bodies. A continual reoccurring of limbs, torsos, hands, and heads.

In the stark and pretty *We died young*, white space gives shape to two sets of legs in a swimming pool. Who died young? Only the good. In *I healed the little animals*, the bright side of dark hands clumsily truss together cat and bird, predator and prey. The fingers try, and probably fail, to help. With *We had to become monsters to save the world* (*Sheila in a Batman costume*), a cropped torso and missing arms dressed in black and grey, Williamson's conflict, whether hero's or monster's, is clear. We are good and bad; we are good and therefore bad. Her notes from another text sketch, "Dante's *Inferno* outlines a theory that all sin arises from love... The disordered love of good things."

In the last painting, *We saw the racism carved in stone*, she gives no body parts for us to contextualize our own bigotry. Instead, she paints one of racism's most effective structures, a cluster of ghettoized buildings, in browns and camo greens, teetering and sinking into mud. Perhaps Nietzsche, in the late nineteenth century, could maintain the privileged fallacy that we cannot know the consequences of our actions. Williamson, of the twenty-first century, can, and does, see everything.

## ALEKSANDRA KAMINSKA & SARAH BLACKER: A PUBLIC Retreat

Building on the simple question *what is happening to public space?* the Toronto-based collective *Public Access (PAC)* has been publishing the journal *PUBLIC Art Culture Ideas* and curating site-specific exhibitions since 1987. PAC's curatorial activities began as interventions and inhabitations of the advertising landscapes of the city and then moved towards collaborative, relational, and dialogical strategies to engage with, include and provoke diverse audiences and publics. Nearly thirty years on, this commitment to notions of the public remains politically urgent. In this context, the symbolic turn inwards of *PUBLIC*'s 50<sup>th</sup> issue, *The Retreat* (forthcoming November 2014), is a provocative meditation on the possibility of gaining perspective on the public by briefly stepping outside of it. Edited by Sarah Blacker, Imre Szeman, and Heather Zwicker, the issue comes out of "The Retreat," an event held at the Banff Centre in August 2012 as one of the four sites of *dOCUMENTA (13)* and run through the Banff Research in Culture (BRiC) research residency program. Bringing together artists and agents from *dOCUMENTA (13)* alongside an international pool of researchers and artists, the three-week retreat was planned as a counterpoint to the monumentality of the exhibition and events in Kassel. The residency was centred around a series of seminars and public talks—those by Franco Berardi, Bruno Bosteels, and Catherine Malabou are included in the issue. Residency participants provide the other essays and visual projects.

The act of embarking upon a "retreat about retreat" in a Canadian mountain resort town is immediately fraught as an act of both elitism and escapism. *PUBLIC* 50 tackles this predicament by considering how the idea of retreating outside of the public can constitute a form of resistance and non-compliance, providing access to new openings and possibilities that may only appear and become intelligible outside of the public's frenetic centre. For example, Carrie Smith-Prei argues for the political significance of retreat in the post-1945 German context through the aesthetic tactics of the author Gilda Elsner, emphasizing that retreat and negation can be modes of attaining agency and building engagement rather than merely acts of cynicism or nihilism. Some contributions employ what Raymond Boisjoly calls "the productive misuse of technology" as a method of retreat. In his piece, Boisjoly allows Kent Mackenzie's film *The Exiles* to retreat from its original form



as film and to produce a new set of meanings as a series of film stills, while David Butler's photo essay translates Robert Smithson's 1967 *Artforum* article "The Monuments of Passaic" into the contemporary visual language of Google Street View. Nico Dockx meanwhile uses the postcard as an art object to address the centrality of epistemological ambivalence, in-betweenness and the difficulty of reaching outwards from within retreat. As Alice Ming Wai Jim writes in her Afterword, retreat does not need to constitute escapism or passivity, and it does not require any physical movement away or apart. Retreat is not the abandonment of the public, its interests and needs, but an "active beholding": a step away in order to consider the totality and to imagine different ways forward. And so, onward, to another thirty public years.

## JACQUELYN ROSS: Artist Poetry, Poets Theatre

In classic PT fashion, July's *Poets Theatre Double Bill* unfolds with the excitable, hushed chaos of an elementary school play. A provisional set clutters the downstairs Apartment Gallery stage with rose petals and foggy vinyl curtains as a woman's lips move quietly from a cornered chair, performing the rehearsal of the cold read. People file in and out of a makeshift backstage area clutching house plants and brooms and loose leaf pages of freshly printed stanzas, flushed with nervous energy. Before long, the tiny room is filled; a secondary audience attends a screened version upstairs. All mirage, pretense, jokes and deceit...perhaps—serendipitously—it is just as poets theatre was always intended.

*Lot Potpourri* by Tiziana La Melia with Julian Hou blends a dream-studded mélange of silhouettes, clinking bracelets and "déjà vu bleed." Moving between curtains autographed haphazardly by "a painter with a black marker," a female protagonist stretches non-athletically as she reads, her paragraphs and pauses demarcated by a luminous space-age elevator music. The script makes room for thought but is deliberately inarticulate in its motives—leaving only a mood or the trace of a morning's exercise routine.

Stuttering badly and deliberately (or is he really on the border of tears?) Donato Mancini plays the hilarious icon of the uncomfortably radical, visibly unstable poet wreaking havoc on the mainstream. And just like his t-shirt that reads, *The writer*

*has sold weapons to your enemy*, here the poet threatens chaos with his sweeping ideas, all misspelled in ugly black pen: “Skool,” “family,” “werk.” The poem’s title *Abattlehorseanudewomanandanecdote* positions Mancini as a crazed storyteller of sorts, all runaway fiction and prophecy, at once sensible and brash.

*Rhythm Jams* by Kate Moss draws a picture with whistles and swoops; musical and textual matchmaking. Out of boredom or whimsy or both, the artist’s studio becomes a banal set where words, rhythm, and line collide to produce “honking dogs” and “honking noses.” Then there’s Johan Björck with his keyboard, playing *Tom Hanks and Tom Cruz*. In this ten-minute-long character duel, Björck’s portrait comes out in the song too, as a lonely narrator of celebrity polls. Followed by a performance by Carolyn Richard on the nature of contemporary media wars and military crises, the poems as a group perform an outspoken contemporaneity: somewhere between fantasy and quiet urgency.

The night closes with an obscure case of a text lost, then found, then found again, as Michael Turner presents a reading from Jack Spicer’s 1946 student adaptation of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1835 story “Young Goodman Brown.” A classic allegory on the ambiguity between good and evil, and one ripe for poetic exaggeration, the play’s excerpts are full of witches and over-the-top dream sequences. A minimally rehearsed cast of local artists and writers delivers the script seated around a candlelit table, like kids discovering a secret diary in a retired attic. Ghosts read in the audience’s company.

Both *Artist Poetry* and *Poets Theatre* set out to define a specific arena with interdisciplinary approaches and aims. Not poetry or theatre for its own sake, but rather as an extension of an entire creative practice. For a notoriously shy but well-read breed of artists and writers, the provocation of performance makes for an awkward spectacle. Some small effort is made “to perform,” but these works are more concerned with the wordiness of words and the noisy images that they conjure than any needed fourth wall or proffered fiction. Call it a public form of artistic research. Of thinking out loud.

The Poets Theatre Festival, co-produced by The Apartment Gallery and *The Capilano Review* featuring San Francisco guests Dodie Bellamy and Kevin Killian, revives these enduring values gallantly.

Poets Theatre Double Bill  
July 31, 2014 @ The Apartment, Vancouver

## JOCELYN MORLOCK / Composing, curating, and collaboration

Over the past two and a half years, I've had the good fortune to be the Composer-in-Residence for Vancouver's Music on Main, and I am just starting my term as Composer-in-Residence for the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra. As well as working on programming concerts, I'll be writing a number of pieces for the VSO during the next couple of years (I say, veritably wriggling with glee). When not working as a C-i-R, I have been a freelance composer, and as such, I have mostly written for performers or presenters on commission.

These two activities may sound entirely similar—both a freelance composer and a C-i-R write music for an individual or ensemble. In fact, the two are quite opposed. One peculiarity of writing on commission is that there is generally a set of restrictions already in place before you start—instrumentation, duration, and often a concert theme have been set. If not a theme per se, chances are that the other pieces on the program are already programmed. Most of the time, this will, and I believe, should, affect what a composer writes in terms of mood and style: a disregard for context works to the detriment of the entire concert if the event has been conceived as a whole experience, rather than a set of unrelated pieces that happen to be written for the same instrumentation.

In contrast to the way composers usually work, as the VSO Composer-in-Residence I will have the freedom to program an entire concert—the VSO's Annex Series is programmed entirely by the C-i-R. I can choose to write a new work of my own and program around it, essentially creating the dramatic arc for the concert and making my own thematic connections between other composers and myself.

Ideally, curating a concert program, creating these thematic connections through thoughtful programming, is creating collaboration between the pieces of music and composers involved. Writing a piece that responds to and engages with the other music on a pre-programmed concert is another form of collaboration. Writing to the strengths of the performers is collaborating with them.

This ethos—gaining ground in Vancouver<sup>1</sup>—is exemplified by Music on Main's recent *Orpheus Project*. This immersive work combined new music, spoken text,

1 Both David Pay, the Artistic Director of Music on Main, <http://vimeo.com/100334199>, and Mark Haney, Artistic Director of Little Chamber Music Series That Could <http://falaiseparkmusic.com/post/96551684546/the-two-way-street>, have recently commented on how collaborating strengthens all of our work.



high-level theatrical design, video, and innovative use of the entire complex of The Cultch. The project was masterminded by David Pay, who assigned broad thematic concepts to the composers which involved our responding to texts and film. Rather than writing in a vacuum, all of our pieces were informed and influenced by our fellow collaborators. This method of working involved some relinquishing of control. Thrillingly, the end result was greater than what any of us could have achieved without the input of the others.

I see fostering collaborative work as a significant part of my role as a composer and curator. I'm happy to see my fellow performers, composers, and concert programmers gaining strength from each other, and I look forward to doing more of it myself.

### LOUIS CABRI: "an expertly banalized version of tomorrow's world"

...The name of  
things is very important. The naming  
of human intellectual work and our  
entire intellectual record is possibly the  
most important thing.... (20)

Ron Silliman's *Against Conceptual Poetry* transcribes, into the reified form of expressive linebreaks, an oral interview that the former CEO of Google, Eric Schmidt, conducted with WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange in 2011. Schmidt and company wanted to interview Assange for *The New Digital Age*, which Assange went on to review in the *New York Times*, calling it "an expertly banalized version" of "the inexorable spread of American consumer technology over the surface of the earth" and a "blueprint for technocratic imperialism."

What Assange says about *The New Digital Age*—"this isn't a book designed to be read"—Kenneth Goldsmith has said about some conceptual poetry. Assange adds, "It [Schmidt's book] is a major declaration designed to foster alliances." To compare alliances today (those between conceptual poets, those between global technocrats) is to miss the point that there's currently a split between the formal and the social both in poetry (as aspects of poetry) and between poetry's formalism

and the other social discourses. It takes a poet formed in 1960s revolt to want to reflexively mend that split.

*Against Conceptual Poetry* is one big wikileak into poetryworld. A must read, the “must” here is an ethical must. Silliman’s selected source text addresses the Internet not for its playground but for its politics. Assange is concerned with how the human historical record can be made to disappear on the Internet. By an act of disclosure (the Assange interview is disclosed as a poem), Silliman recalls one of the originating radical gestures of expressive politics transforming 20C poetry: D.H. Lawrence’s analogy of the painted church ceiling ripped asunder to disclose the chaos of the cosmos in infinite space—except here it’s not natural but social machinations revealed. Goldsmith, too, has noted that if as poet or artist you’re not present on the Internet then “you don’t exist.” But can poetry only mimic the present situation where the formal and social aspects of the poem are split, or can poetry change or at least reflexively address this situation?

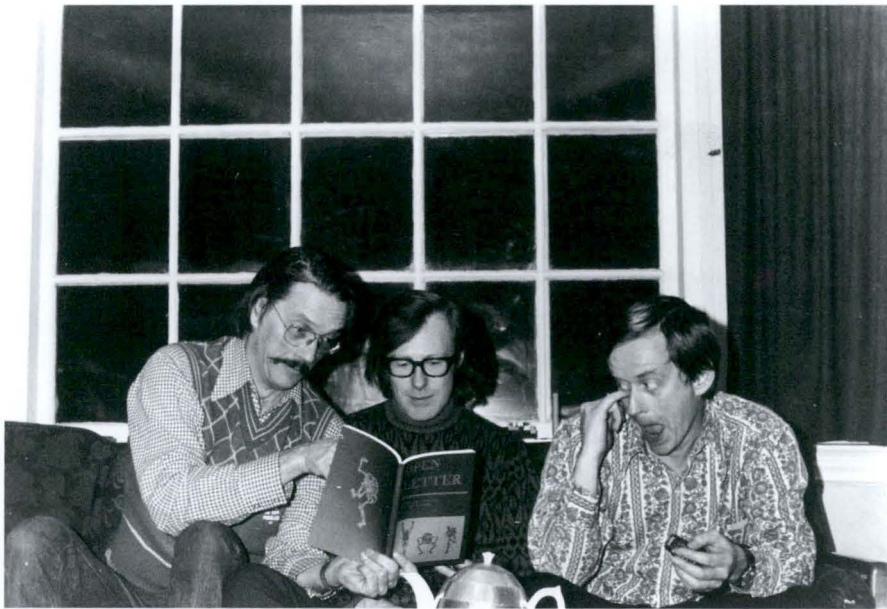
Is *Against Conceptual Poetry* against conceptual poetry? Rather, the book urges us, as did Pound a century ago, to read beyond the literary field (the rough-cut quality and speed of thinking displayed in the interview would have appealed to Pound and signalled its overlooked importance). If we’re only arriving at Assange through poetryworld (i.e., through the book *Against Conceptual Poetry*), then we’re symptoms of the split and not diagnosing it.

Yet as with any conceptual poem that appropriates and repurposes source text, one may read *Against Conceptual Poetry* aslant, for what it says about and adds to poetry. A key question the interview raises is how to preserve, from online tampering, the integrity of the name—from domain name to proper name—and the “human intellectual content” intrinsically attached to it. In this context, Assange evokes for a reader the modernists’ desire for the thing: substitute his example of the name “tomato” for Pound’s example of “red” (in *ABC of Reading*) and Assange morphs into Fenollosa and Agassiz. Due to Silliman’s re-mediation of the interview—from an MP3 audiofile on the WikiLeaks digital archive to a poem published in print by Denver Colorado’s Counterpath Press—one sees Pound’s ideogrammic method as a parallel invention to Assange’s algorithm invented to digitally preserve the name’s intrinsic attachment to its content.

Of all the poets to emerge from the San Francisco poetry scenes of *This* magazine and the Grand Piano reading and talks series, Silliman is perhaps most

sensitive to the ethics of the name as name of a thing in the world. A great tension in *the Alphabet* holds between word and thing, formal language and social world. Evoked at a foundational level, history's records, the name's integrity must be defended from false simulacra, because "as / soon as you have a nice / naming system, some arsehole is going / to come along and register every / short name themselves" (49). "Short names" range from the phrase "the US first amendment" to "Ron Silliman."

Ron Silliman, *Against Conceptual Poetry* (Denver, CO: Counterpath, 2014).



George, Frank Davey, David McFadden, at Frank's house, Toronto, c. 1970.  
Photo credit: Angela Bowering