

## see to see—

### *čəsnaʔəm, the city before the city* (Museum of Anthropology)

*Lyana Patrick*

Standing in the entrance of the Museum of Anthropology's exhibit *čəsnaʔəm, the city before the city*, I listen to Musqueam voices welcoming me to the space. Some people take time to watch and listen; others hurry by. This is an essential point of contact given the ways in which rethinking relationships is at the heart of the exhibit. As the MOA website narrates it, "čəsnaʔəm was first occupied almost 5000 years ago and became one of the largest of the Musqueam people's ancient village sites approximately two thousand years ago."

*čəsnaʔəm, the city before the city* complements two other exhibits at the Museum of Vancouver (MoV) and the Musqueam Cultural Education Resource Centre & Gallery. This particular exhibit features a series of posters behind which run long turquoise banners in the shape of waves. Each poster contains a *hənqəmihən*-language concept (twelve in all), along with photographs and quoted testimonials to animate each one. A computerized timeline shows the development over 9000 years of Coast Salish villages and colonial settlements. As the settlement map reveals, European history in the "new world" actually starts with Musqueam contact.

Opportunities for hands-on sensory engagement with multiple sources appear throughout the exhibit, inviting powerful reflection on Musqueam presence in the territory. One segment explores the concept of "belongings" as articulated by Musqueam people—"artefacts" to archaeologists and

others. What looks like an x-ray machine displays a number of such *ʔələwkʷ* (belongings): a coca cola can, keys, change, a harpoon net, a weight, a knife, a nondescript "beautiful belonging." These items can be moved from a metal gurney to a table (the top of which is a computerized screen) where explanations for each appear. Although at first strange, the x-ray machine and gurney are clever devices. Each element represents a careful cataloguing of belongings (artefacts), much as would take place on an archaeological dig. Like x-rays going deeper to investigate the body's inner workings, so too are we invited to think about, touch, explore the idea of belongings not just as "artefacts" from the past, but as items of ongoing and enduring importance—and erasure—today.

The exhibit is informed by an interplay of oral and written history, of continuity and change. One community member describes the kitchen table as no longer the place where Musqueam teachings are passed on; another remarks that a "feeling of sharing at the kitchen table" persists. And visitors are implicated in these processes of change, even directly encouraged to reflect on their own responsibilities. One of the posters quotes *səlisəy*: "In terms of protecting archaeological sites, it seems like First Nations presence and pressure gets a little bit of reaction but most often it's public pressure that really assists First Nations in protecting the archaeological sites." This is both an indictment of a system that marginalizes Indigenous resistance and an appeal to visitors to consider what responsibility they might have to respond to injustices including not only the desecration of sacred sites, but also unsafe drinking water on reserves, abrogated treaty rights, over-

representation of Indigenous peoples in the justice system, and murdered and missing Indigenous women.

To fully understand the history and contemporary importance of ɫəsnaʔəm, all three exhibits—MOA, MoV, and the Musqueam Cultural Centre—need to be considered together. Each offers its own insights into the history of Indigenous peoples in the territory: ɫəsnaʔəm was an important village and remains a vital transportation node as a north-south corridor. Musqueam's decline was Vancouver's progress. Yet there are constant reminders that this was an incomplete process. These exhibits provide a counternarrative to colonization, an opportunity to listen and remember as acts that lay the foundation for fundamentally transforming relationships.

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**Alex Morrison: *Phantoms of a Utopian Will & Like Most Follies, More Than a Joke and More Than a Whim* (SFU Gallery & Burnaby Art Gallery)**

*Alex Muir*

This fall, as Simon Fraser University's year-long 50th Anniversary celebrations reach their peak, students bustle around the mall in red t-shirts and chalk-drawn flowers and peace signs deck the columns that encircle Freedom Square. SFU Gallery is a curious antechamber to this misty campus fantasy, nestled within the foundation of Arthur Erickson's fifty-year-old quadrangle structure still home to most of the core humanist disciplines while many other programs have long since poured down the mountainside and into other regions of the Lower Mainland.

In the gallery, the work of Alex Morrison and kin from SFU's collection nod to the

long times outside in a same-different type of way. The show marks the fourth time this year that SFU Galleries have dipped into their home institution's collection and the practices of its alumni to reflect on the legacy of the contemporary arts at SFU. Ornate but geometric dividers made of MDF house ceramics, drawings, and paintings conversant in the modernist vernaculars conveyed by pieces featured in SFU Galleries' previous *Geometry of Knowing* exhibitions. Here, however, the interplay of formal epistemologies is irradiated with flashes of the troubled histories that gave rise to but also resisted these countercultural modes. Both up the mountain and down by the lake in SFU's companion exhibition at the Burnaby Art Gallery, wide-eyed utopian/reactionary declarations are cast in a jaundiced light, blighted with ironic melancholy.

Although the 105-year-old Ceperley Mansion on Deer Lake, home to the BAG, and the 50-year-old university seem entirely contrary in their historical orientations (the former an example of the ostensibly anti-modern Arts and Crafts movement, the latter a viable film set option for totalitarian states of the present and the future), the exhibitions find some compelling rhymes between these two sites. Morrison's pastiche-work draws out the prominence of *lifestyle* across these historical moments, with an East Van collective housing want ad coming to strongly resemble the crypto-puritanical slogans of neighbouring Arts and Crafts posters. Social and spatial hermeticism come into relief at both sites, suggesting that colonies whose will to inscribe aesthetic sensibilities into space on a total scale can't help but insinuate the arrest of time: a few corners of the woods for the end of history. But when doesn't style make this kind of claim? Does it not always overreach?

If the exhibition is full of soft-spoken stiff-lipped historical jokes, the confluence of the radical and the reactionary makes it difficult to parse insides and outsides of scorn. *We Dance on Your Grave*, a compilation of slowed-down video documentation of SFU's 40th Anniversary celebrations—capturing administrators, faculty, funders, and alumni dancing in tacky historical drag—is so lewd that it hides like pornographic content on the office side of the gallery wall. Then again, the current festivities a decade later look much the same, with hippy simulacra parading once more in full view of the chalk-wielding freshmen in Freedom Square. And it is still these dancers to whom we all sing for our supper. Students pass through the present show and by their own bronzed historical predecessors angrily, obstinately wielding blank protest placards—remediated figures drawn from bygone conservative political cartoons. Outside, their teaching assistants and sessional instructors are, once again, actually on strike—holding the future hostage, the administration would have us believe. In such a haze, how do these children of flower-children read this work? What exactly do *they* see?

***That Winter the Wolf Came* by Juliana Spahr (Commune Editions, 2015)**

*Sarah Dowling*

Juliana Spahr's most recent book, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, continues her prior explorations of political complicity and physical connection. In nine short pieces in verse and prose, this book shares the distinctive accumulation of concrete details and the delicate ecological allegories that have shaped her oeuvre, from *Spiderwasp; Or, Literary Criticism* (1998) to *Well Then There*

*Now* (2011). Spahr often responds directly to political crises, and the poet-critic Stephen Burt has described *That Winter the Wolf Came* as her "Occupy book." While it vividly documents her experiences of protesting and of social life at the encampments in Oakland, I would alter Burt's description a little: I see this book as distinctly post-Occupy. Its central question is how to cope with "the depression that follows after the most mundane of uprisings is over" (76).

What's most distinctive about *That Winter the Wolf Came* is its strong note of elegy: at the center of the book, the poem "Dynamic Positioning" mourns the human victims of the Deepwater Horizon explosion, listing the names of those who died and those who survived—as well as the names of a quartet of executives who "watched" (49). The poem describes the mechanics of oil extraction and then narrates the disaster in fractured couplets: "First explosion on five seconds aft- / Er. Then explosion again, ten sec- // Onds later. It was not ten / O'clock when the mayday call was first made" (48). The choppy straightforwardness of this poem, and the image of the rig "gutted stem / to stern," is surprisingly affecting.

This elegiac tone suffuses the book, although it is elsewhere expressed with elements of playfulness: in the prose poem "It's All Good, It's All Fucked" (which also calls itself a story), Spahr writes her engagement with Occupy as a failed romance: "I knew going into it that it never lasts with Non-Revolution. I never thought it would. I just knew I wanted it in whatever moment I could get it. If it did not end, if it became Revolution, I knew that would be hard. That was an entirely different lover" (71). Political disappointment is legitimated through the affective structures of romance: the first poem, "Transitory, Momentary," alludes to a love song that "expresses the

desire to be near someone who is now lost” (12), that mourns “the loss of tongue on clit or cock” (13). Spahr proposes that it is “only through the minor,” through the love song or the doomed relationship, that we can feel more abstract, impersonal losses like the evanescence of Occupy and the possibilities it represented (14).

A couple of decades ago, AIDS activist Douglas Crimp argued that mourning—which seems to pull us uselessly into ourselves—is a politically necessary force. I would have approached Spahr’s book through this lens, but much like Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2015), *That Winter the Wolf Came* complicates received genealogies of activist literature and profoundly challenges conventional imaginings of the figure of the radical. Spahr’s political critique is often a description of mothering: she writes about her infant son drinking “a honeyed nectar of capacitor dielectrics, dyes, and electrical insulation” in her breastmilk (54). She writes about taking him to protests, and about not taking him and then being immediately kettled (23). Parenting becomes a way to describe the taintedness of everything by pollution and capital, and the awkward ambivalence of our gestures in response. If we are unmoored, swallowed by disappointed hopes, Spahr shows that dependency—the network of care for other beings—is all that lets us go on.

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***A Brief History of Portable Literature*  
by Enrique Vila-Matas (1985), trans.  
Anne McLean & Thomas Bunstead  
(New Directions, 2015)**

**Steffanie Ling**

For the Dadaists, a “reality” built upon facts, virtue, and propriety was not only a Fascist regime but a certified bore and an insult

to the senses. The notion of a tome—a big, authoritative book—is thus a major offense that flies in the face of inquiry: one must always be brief, and what you express must be loaded with pointed disruption.

*A Brief History of Portable Literature* swaps the adjectives in the title of one of Tristan Tzara’s Dadaist manifestos, “A Portable History of Brief Literature” (“Histoire portative de la littérature abrégé”), exposing what little difference there is between the qualities of being brief and being portable. Like Tzara’s manifesto, Enrique Vila-Matas’ novel expresses the necessity of brevity against a historical backdrop of rampant grandiosity and correctness. Vila-Matas channels the free-fall of Tzara, who decades before him had with one hand let go of this reality and with the other suppressed a yawn.

Based on the conduct of the novel’s “Shandies”—a secret society built on a love of all things miniature, mischievous, and illogical, featuring Vila-Matas’ draft picks from the pre-War European intelligentsia—it would seem that the historical avant-garde was helmed by a league of recalcitrant single men (and history confirms this to an extent). Across chapters entitled “All Day Long in the Deck Chairs,” “The Party in Vienna,” “New Impressions of Prague,” and “Bahnhof Zoo,” Francis Picabia, Marcel Duchamp, Paul Morand, and a handful of their ilk find ways to brandish (dare I say, politicize) their unabating leisure.

To be a Shandy, one must embody Marcel Duchamp in “...his perfect functioning as a ‘bachelor machine’, his disinterest in grand statements, his cultivation of the art of insolence, and his passion for travelling with a small suitcase containing weightless versions of his work” (25). Alternatively, one could possess a penchant for conspiracy or a flag embroidered with the phrase “ONWARD

TO A SILKY PROSE.” If you *must* commit suicide, do it in the most sumptuous hotel you can find; if you want to throw a party, *please* have it in the guise of someone else’s soirée...it’s a *secret* society for god’s sake.

In the pre-War period, when the real-life counterparts of the Shandies were alive, truth and knowledge were beginning to present less as edification and more as ultimatum. If one considers all the resources put into corralling artworks for *The Degenerate Art Exhibition* or *Entartete Kunst* to inform society of what kind of art it should dislike and what ideas to shun, one sees how makers and thinkers naturally must resort to behaving like a secret society, sprawling their activities and operating on a frequency clandestine to the powers that be. In this sense, *A Brief History* presents a lightened caricature of a society in diaspora. As the Shandies go on to congregate at the International Sanatorium on the hospitality of a man called Marienbad, and then to a stationary submarine rented by a prince, the scenes reflect not merely a fabled rejection of society, but Vila-Matas’ vision of a most refined concept of stowing away. The novel’s secret society disbands after being exposed at a lecture given by one of their key members, Aleister Crowley, but finds itself pleased about it because now the delicious rumors can commence! Rumors—as furtive, imaginary, and impertinent material—are almost the ideal vehicle for a secret society to dissolve into without disappearing.

Originally published in Spanish in 1985, the book reemerges as an extreme example of the privileging of forms of eccentricity and individuality that most artists today wouldn’t strive to inhabit. What remains relevant is how crucial coterie is to the survival of our ideas and livelihood—though to what degree of urgency seems much more obscure now.

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**DOWNVERSE by Nikki Reimer  
(Talonbooks, 2014)**

*Adam Seelig*

Nikki Reimer’s *DOWNVERSE* opens with an epigraph not from a celebrated visionary but from an “inebriated audience member at a poetry reading” who, tongue loosened, informs the author that

I hated your poem.  
Your poem was so boring.

It brings to mind the perma-drunks of Michael Dowse’s *FUBAR* shouting at a screen showing an art film: “Turn down the suck!” It’s a pithy protest that Reimer’s book both adopts and attacks.

Hostility towards poetry pervades the volume: “you wrote some words that may or may not rhyme. you memorized them. you said them in front of people. they clapped. or didn’t. good for you. now go cure cancer” (“that stays news” 61). So, too, hostility towards artists: “If you aren’t making enough / money / from your artistic / endeavours get a different / job” (“artists decline as percentage of workforce” 73). What’s remarkable in *DOWNVERSE* is that in quoting mindless hostility towards poetry within a poetic context, that very hostility ends up poeticized. By voicing the personal, social, and economic forces degrading poetry, Reimer elevates them through the very art they oppose, subverting their suppression, one-upping their down. The line break in the epigraph above proves the point: even an asshole’s slight can be transformed into verse.

Complicating this counterattack against the forces of philistinism is *DOWNVERSE*’s own admission of the limitations of poetry, a poetics of futility poets experience in ever failing to achieve perfection: “there was no real poetry, / only notes towards a process / we could never reach” (“living rage” 96). It

seems that, rather than denying opposition, Reimer accepts. When a drunk audience member hates a poem, *DOWNVERSE*'s bardic self-loathing understands, perhaps even agrees. When poetry appears utterly worthless in comparison with a "cure for cancer," *DOWNVERSE* humbly accepts its Lazarusian shortcomings. The book's dedication to the author's brother, Chris Reimer (1986-2012), poignantly highlights this insufficiency in the face of death.

Yet there is an urge here to shake poetry out of its complacent stupor and save it from its *defunctitude* as "another dead language from the ivory tower" even if writing anew only amounts to "obsolescence in the wind" ("one or five things to consider" 92). There are generative devices reminiscent of Raymond Queneau's "100,000,000,000,000 Poems" (comprised of aleatory permutations of cut-up strips of text), yielding swerves like "it will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be / glenlivet" ("latter-day psalms" 5). There are Jackson Mac Low-like textual fusions such as "television vs. the real" in which new-age pop-psychology from Dr. Phil is interspersed with excerpts from Jacques Lacan's *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*. There are hashtag coinages in "the declarative, the dialogic: the decade goes pop," a call-and-response series with moments like "we are against hand jobs on buses #likegross" (99) and "we resist certitude #sometimes" (101). There are obnoxious quotes from online comment streams and random misspellings to keep us on our toes—harkening back to Reimer's earlier book title, [*sic*] (Frontenac House, 2010). There are appropriations of texts related to oil pipelines, the Occupy Movement, and Vancouver Airport's 2007 taser death of Robert Dziekański.

A practical concern of *DOWNVERSE* is the unattainability of basic housing in

Vancouver, Reimer's city for a stint (she now lives in Calgary). As we know from Sachiko Murakami's *Rebuild*, Vancouver is a city where "reality checks" have been supplanted by "Realty Checks," the "i" dropped, individuals priced out. *DOWNVERSE*'s poem "materiality" details this predicament by calculating monthly rent against monthly expenses using a so-called "rental affordability indicator." If you are not wealthy and want a place of your own in Canada's most expensive real estate market, the best you can hope for is a basement suite (can't get more down than that) constructed of "moonbeams" propping up "marmalade" skyscrapers ("towers of basement suites" 34). In other words, dream on.

Harsh "materiality" defiles the spirituality often evoked in *DOWNVERSE*: "separate darks from whites, delicates from soiled, loaves from fishes" (6). Laundry and liturgy are interchangeable. If parts of the body can be reduced to mere matters of money, or fractions of "The Principal Sum" in the clinically chilling poem "insurance outcomes," what solace, the book seems to ask, can we find in "latter-day psalms"?

The wisdom of *DOWNVERSE* is its balance between the what-should-be of religion and the what-is-now of reality; between Christ (Jesus) and Horton (Tim); between wish and is: "in a better world / in the real world / in the future / in this situation" ("internet" 87). The problem is that the world, as is, teems with injustices to decry, leaving us with the burning feeling—however hopeless, however useless, however spiritual—that "you should write that down. be a complainer, not a change agent" ("one or five things to consider" 92). For all of Reimer's "postpostpostneopostmodernism," her principle mode turns out to be a rousing, ancient one: the jeremiad.