

PIERRE COUPEY / The North Vandals: A Conversation



*Was Tatlow House Publishing formed in order to publish *The Body*?*

David Phillips and Hope Anderson formed Tatlow House primarily to publish *The Body*, although I'm pretty sure they envisaged further publications. There may have been other books, even some published under the Tatlow imprint but not produced by David or Hope. But *The Body*, this anthology of work by John Pass, Sharon Thesen, Hope Anderson, Billy Little, Scott Watson, Brian Fawcett, Barry McKinnon, George Stanley, David Phillips and myself, could be called the embodiment of the so-called "North Vandals."

So all of those published were "Vandals"?

Well, that "north vandals" tag wasn't something we thought up. We're clearly not a homogenous group, and only David, Hope, John and I lived in North Vancouver at the time. That was Bowering's pun, which he might have conjured at the time of the first Creative Writing Conference at Malaspina College. Or later, after *The Body* came out, I can't remember. And maybe he was only referring to me, David and Hope. I'll have to ask him. I'm pretty sure the majority of the people in *The Body* wouldn't consider themselves full patch Vandals, then or now—honorary Vandals maybe, or volunteer Vandals, or weekend Vandals. I guess David and Hope are the core Vandals, since they both lived on Tatlow Street in North Van.

What were these creative writing conferences?

They grew out of the Colleges in the '70s—Capilano, Malaspina, New Caledonia, Vancouver Community College, Okanagan, Northern Lights, Fraser Valley, Douglas, the others—they emerged from our annual Creative Writing Articulation meetings, which we took advantage of to kick up the energy about writing and poetry in BC. So many wonderful people at those meetings: Barry McKinnon, John Lent, Ron Miles, Tom Wayman, again so many others. The conferences also represented our resistance to the universities, whose dead hands we often felt at those articulation meetings, and we thought we

could offer practising writers and our creative writing students richer, more intense experiences in a three day block of readings, panels, and discussions than they'd ever get at UBC, SFU or UVic. Of course, we're all universities now...

How did they work?

The first Creative Writing Conference was hosted by Malaspina and it was a great success. Marvelous group readings and individual readings, Maria Hindmarch, Daphne Marlatt, George Bowering, Fred Wah, Pat Lane, George Stanley, Phillips, McKinnon, with Roy Kiyooka wandering around taking luminous photographs. And at Malaspina we discovered some new poets, in particular Pete Culley and Kevin Davies, brilliant Nanaimo teenagers who've gone on to do real work. The second, organized largely by Jon Furberg, was at VCC with a guest reading from Allen Ginsberg introduced by Warren Tallman. The third, organized by Sharon Thesen and Maria Hindmarch, was held at Cap, where Sheila Watson blew us all away with her brilliance. There was one at Okanagan College at the Vernon Campus where Barry McKinnon kept us in stitches for days with a tour de force non-stop running commentary on the absurdity of it all, and Colin Browne screened his latest film; and the last, which I missed—I think I was travelling, Paris and the Ivory Coast—was at CNC. It was organized by Barry, and called *Words/Loves*, with readings by Audrey Thomas and Ken Belford, and a major reading by Robert Creeley amid Prince George wild times. Apparently Robin Blaser was there as

Creeley's chaperone in the Canadian north. Barry also invited Cohen, Atwood and Munro, but they were busy elsewhere. There may have been other conferences. Certainly the first were very exciting.

What dates can we attach here?

If we're looking at a chronology, blocks of writing things happening on or from the North Shore, *The Capilano Review* started in 1972, the Capilano Poetry Reading Series in 1974, the Creative Writing Conferences in 1976, and *The Body* comes out in 1979. Roughly.

Did the North Shore become a focus for you once you started teaching at Cap?

The North Shore became important for me well before I came to Cap because of my friend David Rippner, one of those hippie refugees from the States at the time of the Vietnam War, who brought that California '60s energy and excitement with him. Davey was famous on the 4th Avenue Kitsilano scene, and later on Lower Lonsdale, as The Leathersmithe—he made sandals, belts, vests and artsy leather stuff, a guy with humor and the best American openness—cheerful, positive and razor smart. So when Davey and his girlfriend moved shop to Lower Lonsdale from 4th Avenue, my family and friends had a reason, for the first time, to cross the bridge. And going into North Van seemed like going into the wild, a trek to some mysterious, far place, like Nepal or Tibet. For some reason we never considered West Vancouver any kind of a destination.

So this was in the late '60s?

Yeah, '68, '69, in there. So that was the first focal point for us to come from the sophisticated urban scene to the wilds of Lonsdale. And then I was hired at Cap in 1970 and started doing the *Review*. At that time my first marriage was breaking down, and I thought, why not be on the North Shore where I was working? For one thing, everything was cheaper in North Van and none of us had much money. I found a slum dwelling on Lower Lonsdale above a café called the Meat Market, a former butcher shop that morphed into a hippie café where everything was whole grain, sprouts, granola and so on.

For \$85 a month I rented two rooms above the Meat Market, two long railway-car rooms. One became my studio, the other my living space: sleeping loft, living room, dining room. The bathroom and shower was communal, down the hall, which the neighborhood drunks and Al Neil made free use of. The place was basic and ugly. In exchange for a painting and a little cash David Phillips agreed to make it liveable. David is a superb carpenter as well as a superb poet. I found a cheap sling of D-grade cedar planks and he turned the rooms into a work of art. Along with a few salvaged Persian carpets, the cedar made it a warm and comfortable place. Some early issues of the *Review* were done in those two rooms.

What was the Lower Lonsdale area like then?

Basically it was gritty, tough, working poor, not at all the gentrified area it's becoming now, but

filled with character and characters. People on LIP Grants pretending to make documentaries, movie set painters like Phil Morgan, a Lynn Valley giant whose name I forget now who was an extra in Fellini films, Barry Cogswell whose ceramics kiln at the back of the Meat Market caught fire one day and almost burned the whole place down, and of course notorious outsiders and artists like Al Neil, who would weave in and out of the scene. And then there was the pre-history of the people who lived on the mud flats—who built the squats off Dollarton, following in some ways in the footsteps of Malcolm Lowry—Tom Burrows and Al Neil and a host of others. And there was a group of kids from Lynn Valley who were involved in poetry, fresh, smart young guys like Martin Jensen, who seemed to know more about Charles Olson than anyone else. Gerald Giampa, the master letterpress printer, was a friend of Martin's and also came out of Lynn Valley. Pieces of culture springing up everywhere on the North Shore.

Lower Lonsdale then didn't have restaurants, it had bars. There were two infamous hotels on Lower Lonsdale, the Olympic which was known as the Big O, and the Saint Alice, and both had beer parlours, both notorious for drunken fights. We preferred the Big O, but we'd count the number of motorcycles outside first, and if there were more than six, we wouldn't go in, we'd head down the street to the Saint Alice and check for bikes there. The Alice also had a cocktail bar called the Cockatoo Lounge, if we wanted to avoid the craziness of the main bar.

For the ladies . . .

Yes, and for the more sophisticated drinkers and us chicken-shit poets who wanted to live.... It had bamboo walls, fake parrots, it was bizarre. A little outpost of Hawaii, kind of Humphrey Bogart-ish. And then we discovered Mac's Billiards, the best pool hall in the Lower Mainland. This was the unsung jewel of Lower Lonsdale, its heart and soul, and much missed when it had to close. David Phillips and I, and anyone else we could round up, would shoot snooker there at least twice, three times a week. We weren't great, so we never got to play table one, which was reserved for the money players, the pros. And we weren't good enough for table two, which had very narrow pockets and hard banks. But Mac made sure we always got table three, which was just right for us: forgiving pockets and cushions, and every now and then he'd give us a free lesson. A very generous man and the master of his domain. Mac's Billiards was an oasis of peace on Lower Lonsdale, no fights. On one occasion we had a full afternoon tournament with Brian Fisher, Pat Lane, and Dwight Gardiner showing the rest of us how the game was really played. And the conversations about poetry and writing and reading, the jokes and laughter, would interweave with all of this.

Did you think of yourselves as a group, though?

If at all, a very loose one, a loose grouping of companions, on the margins, fluid, blues singers, romantics, individual voices, with a certain amount

of defiance of establishment and elders, but not an "organized" group, say, like TISH. We had no program or consensus on poetry or poetics, just a sense of companionship, however momentary, in our deep love for poetry and for writing that energized the field.

Did you see yourselves as an alternative to TISH?

No, none of us were "charter" members of TISH, but our basic affiliations are with the TISH poets and with the advanced writing from here and elsewhere they also embraced and championed. So not an alternative, but another inflection from many shared roots and experiences in poetry. And though a younger generation, most of us started working before we knew of TISH. My roots were in Montreal where I studied with Louis Dudek, and David Phillips started writing poetry in high school in South Vancouver with bpNichol. Sharon Thesen and Brian Fawcett must have had their awakenings in Prince George before getting to Vancouver, and Barry McKinnon arrives in Vancouver via Calgary and Montreal and studies with Irving Layton. George Stanley arrives from San Francisco where I'm sure he was in very close touch with much that inspired TISH. And Billy Little arrives from New York, Buffalo, and San Francisco with his own direct ties to the '60s and '70s avant garde American poets. But maybe some of us saw ourselves at that time as more free, more wild, more radical, less theory driven.

What was your role with The Body?

David and Hope were the editors and publishers, and I was just a facilitator, because of my experience with the *Review*: how to organize a book, take it through a press, design covers and whatnot. They raised the money to cover costs, debated who to invite, worked through the manuscripts, did the final editing.

Why The Body?

Good question, and I'm not sure I can remember the particular discussions that led up to it, but *The Body* seems now the logical culmination of all the parties, dinners, friendships, companionships and conversations—episodic, extended—we had been engaged in until then. Not to mention the laughter and the jokes, the general silliness and craziness, like John Pass's infamous and hilarious Sasquatch Streak. And the arguments and fights—we had our share of those. We wanted to do something to celebrate those gatherings and conversations. And when the idea of an anthology somehow came up, Hope said *let's call it the body*, and that stuck.

We talked a lot about the intelligence of the body, proprioception, that notion of re-enactment, the poetics of place, so many of the ideas that come from Projective Verse and from Williams and his thought on the work of the imagination. And much of the ferment came from Phillips and MacKinnon, the genius of their conversations, both of whom were deeply influenced by Creeley, and much interested in that order of plain and direct speech, in the concrete, the particular, the objective. We talked about what we liked and disliked, respected and admired, what we'd whistle down as fake or pretentious. But nothing formalized—no rules, no manifestos, no program. *The Body* conspicuously lacks a preface or introduction from the editors, anything that would make a claim, but simply proposes a constellation of companions who came together at that time, without any sense then of how we might eventually drift apart because of age, argument, circumstance and geography. And all of us have gone on to pursue our individual paths and investigations, most of us scattered across BC, Brian in Toronto, Hope in Florida, and Billy in Paradise. Wherever our bodies and brains have taken us.



Al Neil, *Gertrude Stein*, 1985, collage, 76.8 x 58.2 cm.
Collection of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery,
University of British Columbia. Gift of Bill Jeffries, 2008.
Photo: Howard Ursuliak



42 Al Neil, *Emily Carr In Her Garden*, 1985, collage, 76.3 x 57.7 cm, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Gift of the Estate of Rose Emery, VAG 2001.16. Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery