

**Book Series: Origins of Now**  
**Book One: The Village Others**  
**Editor: James K Beach**  
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[INTRO]

**USING THIS VOLUME**

**JAMES K. BEACH, editor**

*This volume is a kaleidoscope of excerpts from personal letters, memoir, ephemeral miscellany, and poetry. Most of the 50 voices gathered here sought fame or optimized freedom of expression half a century ago. Some were married, for better or worse, to film, music, performance, stage or visual art. A number defy any one category and worked in several mediums to push an effect.*

*To use this volume well, intrepid reader, please consider each of the above data. Study the styles of these writers. Heed yet discard any advice. Imitate and build upon or deconstruct whatever turns you on and whatever turns on you. Consider their artistic choices. Then relaunch yourself... into cyberspace and beyond, with whatever you create.*

*Industry has changed less in 50 years than you might believe. People are still people, after all. Artists continue to be artists. Relations, conflicts, trials and errors, successes, hardships, prolific outputs and occasional burnouts of these 50 artists provide essential info, from the art hub of Manhattan in the 1950s through the 1980s—one of many hubs but arguably of high interest.*

\*

*When the many Villages of Manhattan were beginning to “happen” artistically, a complex but*

*random design emerged to nearly topple the establishment. This covert blueprint for evolution is vital.*

*By extrapolating documented history any artist can see how key players living in 1950s Manhattan led the way with edgy stage and street performances, and combined visual art displays. Also obvious is that around 1960, an intriguing spoken word coffeeshop platform emerged to shake up institutional poetry. Alongside, experimental music and rock bands formed locally. Modern and pop art bloomed and fermented in galleries and elsewhere in the Village. Choreographed shows balanced out the improvisational acts. Independent art house movies became trendy to film and to see. Local fashion followed suit. Vitality streamed. Multimedia technology for the first time projected art out there.*

*As counterculture thrived, an influx of artists claimed residences previously occupied by immigrants or the perpetually poor. Loft living was illegal but otherwise practical for an artist. Exploring the mind was a quest superior to materialism. Ideas stretched to the most expansive. Mysticism was at a high, due to available psychedelic substances and as sober reaction against the prevailing bourgeois mindset.*

*The Villages rapidly evolved into a mecca of refined hedonism, political resistance, liberal openness and staunch discovery. As elsewhere in 1963, a shift can be noted in the artistic output of the Village after JFK was assassinated and the new president began drafting men for the war*

*in Vietnam. A lot of artists began to craft current events into their work. In this unique microcosm a sum of issues -- racial inequality, gender stereotypes, sexual repression, forced puritanical morality, government sanctions, profanity and taboos, use of illicit drugs, commonplace petty incarceration, biased police profiling, info leaks and flaws in the academic system -- sat perpendicular to the war conflict. Hordes of artists began expressing themselves simultaneously, making heady nexuses of radical art and social activity.*

*Cultural renaissance continued at a fevered pitch through the 1970s and into the early 1980s, at which point the Reagan administration swept aside progress in exchange for conservative values and emphasis on fiscal aims, countrywide. AIDS arrived and effectively stymied sexual activity. Urban blight and decay brought flight to suburbia. To many Villagers, the 1980s marked the end of a heyday that's only now come back around to us.*

*Media today progresses at an absurd, user-friendly rate. In the decades since these artists broke or gained ground myriad Technology once reserved for monied and or educated artists is now available for all of us to employ, allowing any plugged-in artist to distribute his or her art to virtually anyone on the planet. (Back in 1969, you'd need to paste your work on the moon to achieve today's potential for global audience...) But old-school paths of getting heard or read or seen also remain powerful, despite or maybe because of what's possible on Internet. You as artist do need to distinguish yourself from the masses; anyway, this volume will help, in theory.*

**[THE VILLAGE OTHERS]**



**ALLAN KAPROW**

We have things to do.  
“Anarchy” can now be  
reevaluated. If we owe  
allegiance to no one and  
no institution of beauty,

however sanctified, we are only turning away from what should be left behind: the idea of achievement. This bogey has stifled us too often. The long shadow of Dante or Michelangelo is only a shadow after all, and not the intensity, the electricity, that infused their art. We can approach them with understanding and general affection when we have made something actual ourselves. We are adventurers. We do not have to “hope” for anything. We are busy dreaming. We are hard and tender without nostalgia, fearless, ecstatic. We are giving to the past and to the future, the present.

*from A Program of Happenings? Events! & Situations?  
at the Pratt Institute on May 2, 1960 (reprinted with  
permission of the Getty Research Institute)*



**CAROL BERGÉ**

**(photo by Ed Druck)**

On the edge of 1961, the first coffeehouse opened in an area of Manhattan that was becoming known as the East Village. The area was ripe for gentrification: a run-down district next to The Bowery, with its cheap hotels and rooming-houses. Tenth Street was already attracting Abstract Expressionist artists and avant-garde performers who opened room-sized galleries or private studios (recent and current residents included the Brata Brothers, Hilda Carmel, Willem DeKooning, **Allan Kaprow**), and “Mystery Bus Tours” from the suburbs of Long Island made regular stops on Tenth Street to give suburban folk a vicarious risk.

The Tenth Street Coffeeshop opened and began readings. One night I went in, with poems I’d written in Mexico and Europe. Unlike the West Village coffeeshops, this was a tiny space, divided by a trellis-like barrier into two sections; at the far end was a coffee-bar. A barrier meant they could fit a few more tables into the space. It was warm and well-lit. People were reading their poems aloud; the M.C. was a lawyer manqué, Howard Ant, who also wrote poems and was a gambler, a bespectacled gent who lived in the West Village in a cellar apartment and whose poems sounded surrealistic to me. I kept going back, not reading, just listening.

One night there was a reading unlike anything I’d ever experienced: Jackson Mac Low was mumbling words that had no sense or order and called them poetry. I and others were very upset;

Howard asked Jackson to leave. He did, with his small coterie of friends. I took a strange feeling away from that night's events; it haunted me as I fell asleep in the tiny room upstairs from my Gallery. The classic ground under my feet shook... it challenged my preconceived standards of "poetry." I decided to force myself to be open to what Jackson was doing.

*known for his 200+ Happenings, ambitious assemblagist Allan Kaprow moved into and out of the Village, staging many anarchists of art before scaling into intimacy with his lesser-known Activities*



### STEVE CANNON

Keep in mind, this was a low-income, low-rent neighborhood, like Brownsville and East New York are today, with lots of folks who had nothing. The beautiful thing about the downtown scene was we thought of ourselves as **one big family** of more than five-hundred; we were all together, along with the political types. Every artist was as political as most who called themselves activists, and we all knew each other. In spite of our fistfights and arguments, we went along to get along. That is what made New York City the spot and even what made it the destination it is now.

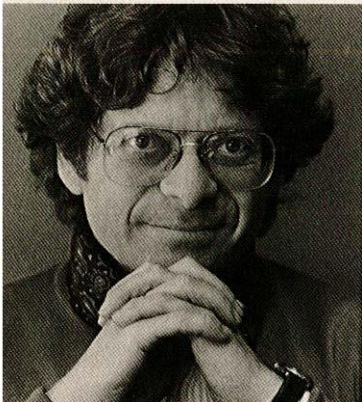
Now all the gentrifiers are here and no one talks to each other. And now that cell phones and smartphones and the internet are here, that profound sense of community seems to be slowly disappearing. For the most part, the young folk's scene is moving to Bushwick and elsewhere in Brooklyn. But that's in trouble too, like the galleries moving from Soho to Chelsea. The yups

moving in are pushing out the young artists because today it seems like everyone in New York City is supposed to buy in.

But as an artist who was here at the beginning and who knows what has made this city great, I would love to see how the new generation of yuppie youth would fair at that original party full of artists and outpatients from Bellevue that saxophonist Marzette Watts and I threw in '62. Maybe that would make them drop their cell phones and start talking to one another. Or maybe they would just take a video and post it online, for the NSA to file away. Who knows?

*"one big family" of activists, actors, dancers, musicians, poets, visual artists, writers, et al.*

### **SERGE GAVRONSKY**



Could there have been an equal number of different options from which to choose, other cards from similar decks, other hands with greater gifts to shuffle the experiences and lay them on the table for you, in utter calm, to choose from

*from Serge's "Below the Surface"*





**ROBERT BRUCE NEWMAN**

**(image by the artist)**

In 1966 various poet friends and I located a studio space off the established gallery path, off Broadway, on the top floor of the building, the 7th floor. The space was 40 feet by 40 feet, with an overhead skylight. It was leased by Naomi Dash, who became co-director with me, believing in the vision we all had of investing in a spatial format. I named the gallery Gain Ground.

Our first exhibition opened in April of 1968: **Bookwork Art, Objects Made by Poets, Word Art, and Poetic Visions**. The panorama included word-operative art by Eleanor Antin, Carol Bergé, Jackson Mac Low, and Hannah Weiner, and was so rich that some of you returned two and three times. Coming into the gallery you noticed labels on the floor that lead to a complex of labels by Vito Acconci. A continuous-loop light box by Bici Forbes Hendricks rotated words and meanings about words and light. Metal letters in a cage by Ron Gross would absorb you if you opened the cage and arranged the letters to verbalize. John Giorno offered a silk-screened poster repeating the phrase “I’m tired of being afraid.” There were also reading tables with chairs; Carol Skylark’s book of drawings with evocative hand-written legends sat next to a book of cut-out words and images by Patricia Sloan, which sat next to my book **SIGNS**. I showed my first speaking mirror, which caught your image with the words:

HERE’S A LIVE PHOTOGRAPH OF YOU  
HOWEVER YOU THINK YOU LOOK

*architect and teacher Vito Acconci embraced the 1960s & 1970s with sundry attempts at art, including editing a journal with Bernadette Mayer, and a street performance titled **Seedbed**, for which he masturbated under a blanket*

## STEVE CANNON

The first downtown art party of any notoriety on the Lower East Side happened on Clinton and East Houston, at my place, with more than 200 outpatients from Bellevue Clinic's Mental Hospital in attendance. Word has it that comedian Mort Sahl was there. Everyone was paranoid and kept seeing things and talking about flying saucers, and who killed who?

When roommate Marzette Watts and I got evicted, he went back to Alabama and I moved to the streets and Washington Square. It was there I met Bruce Brown — the political philosopher from Hollywood, who was then studying political theory at NYU — and my first wife Kathy, who had just gotten out of a New Orleans jail. It was August and she had a full scholarship to Cornell University, so we hitchhiked up to Ithaca. She got thrown out of Cornell when they found out she'd been in jail in New Orleans, so we hitchhiked to Boston by way of North Adams. But we got busted in North Adams for hitchhiking and vagrancy, in other words, for being broke. My being black and her being white, there was a law against being broke in America. Everyone seemed to think that I was her pimp. They gave her ten days in jail, and I got fifteen. They were trying to separate us.

We reunited in Massachusetts and found an apartment in the heart of Boston Bohemia. There, we found people of our own ilk — painters, writers, musicians, etc. who loved nothing more than sleeping around and talking about politics and art. I spent most of my time working for a shoe

distributor and writing at night and catching up with my reading. (I was big on Kafka at that time.) It was there I first heard Timothy Leary on the radio talking about LSD, and notions of “tune in, turn on, drop out.” A year later he was a big name all over the country.

We moved back to the Lower East Side and people in that neighborhood were smoking reefer and eating gobs of hallucinogenic mushrooms and dropping acid. Everyone stayed up all night listening to loud jazz and folk music, arguing about the crisis with JFK at the helm, and after his assassination, arguing about LBJ and the war in Vietnam.

*\_a.k.a. the East Village, which includes the tiny Nuyorican plot known as Alphabet City; LES/EV is adjacent to Greenwich Village, the West Village, SoHo, NoHo, Tribeca, other Manhattan Villages*



**SUSAN SHERMAN**

to the poets who die unknown  
who live their poems day by day  
bare the chaos of lost words  
Here's to the poems that never get published  
that lie fallow in someone's veins  
that burned in Hiroshima and Nagasaki Vietnam  
New York City Portland, Maine  
Here's to the poets in Nicaragua  
Cuba South Africa El Salvador

in the southern countryside of all the Americas  
and the northern cities too  
Here's to the women and men  
who never knew they were poets  
had no one to tell them

*from Susan's popular "Here's a Poem"*



**RONALD TAVEL**

It was after the days when I lived in Africa that I first visited a poetry café. It was Christmas of '63 and I remember the night and where and how and when. It was hard on the heels of Sabu's death ("Sabu, The Elephant Boy, 39, Star of Jungle Films, Dies") and, within hours, that of the president himself. I'd gone to see my kid brother, Harv, at the apartment he'd inherited from me, fifth floor front and right at 27 St. Marks Place, a few doors up from W. H. Auden. A friend of Harv's roommate, the 16mm film star Joel Markman, suggested that I distract myself, by reading some of my poems at a coffeehouse downstairs instead of up here in this claustropad, they're good enough to, he warranted, you really think so, I said, you're sure? That was Café Le Metro around the corner on 2nd and it would lead to readings at the Deux Megots.

What I probably read that night was IN THE WHATEVER HAPPENED DEPARTMENT I ASK/ to John Sheffield... I liked the idea of writing and then testing work so shortly after its composition, a like that would come in right handy by early '65 when I was drafted into underground screenwriting by Andy Warhol at the pace of a movie a month.



**ROBERTS BLOSSOM**

In  
the  
'60s  
I  
Was  
alone  
In

the  
Village

I  
Had  
aspired  
To  
think  
Divinely

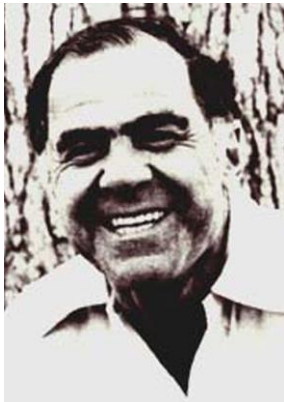
as  
Keats  
had  
Taught  
me

Which  
probably  
Made  
me  
More  
alone

At  
a  
Certain  
point  
I  
invented  
**Multimedia**  
(along

With  
Some  
Others)

*some historians credit Bob for inventing the term “multimedia”; this fragment is from a poem written for Carol Bergé, circa 1996, as she was compiling her anthology **Light Years: Multimedia in the East Village** (AWAREing Press/Spuyten Duyvil, 2010), which is a source of many excerpts in this compilation*



### **SIMON PERCHIK**

It seems to me that there is available to writers a spectrum. At one end is prose, appropriate for essays, news, weather reports and the like. Writers move back and forth along this spectrum when writing fiction. At the other end is poetry. Thus, prose excludes ambiguity, surmise and misunderstanding, and is faulty if it lacks a coherent thrust guided by rules of logic, grammar and syntax.

Poetry, on the other hand, is defined by its resistance to such rules. Poetry is ignited, brought to life by haunting, evasive, ambiguous, contradictory propositions. Most writers of poetry need a method to force the idea for a poem out of the brain, to bring the idea to the surface, to consciousness. Let's face it: any idea that is easily accessible is all but certain to be a cliché.

Writers of poetry need to dig into the psyche to be effective and many methods exist for the writer of poetry. My method is known as abstraction: So and so, once thought incongruous with

so and so, suddenly and surprisingly, has everything in the world to do with so and so. Or has nothing to do with so and so but can be reconciled with something else surprising and new to me.

The conditions under which I write are brutal. My brain is deliberately jammed by conflicting impulses. Its neurons are overloaded, on the verge of shutting down. I can barely think. My eyes blur. The only thing that keeps me working is that sooner or later will come the rapture of discovery; that the differences once thought impossible to reconcile, become resolved; one flash fire after another in the lightning storm taking place in my brain.

The reader needs more: a text that lights up fields of reference nowhere alluded to on the page. To be made whole the reader needs to undergo an improved change in mood, a change made more effective if the reader is unaware of why he or she feels better. Exactly like music. That's where poetry gets its power to repair; an invisible touch, ghost-like but as real as anything on earth. To that extent, it informs, as does music, without what we call meaning. It's just that it takes prose to tell you this. Abstraction, since it contradicts the real world, is a striking form of confrontation which jams the brain till it shuts down confused. It befits to refresh the human condition, to make marriages, restore great losses, rally careers.

Of course abstraction is just one of the ways writers arrive at the poem with their idea. But however they come they all leave for the reader **poetry's trademark**. It is that that builds for the over-burdened reader a way out. Perhaps a poem, unlike a newspaper, is just for those who need it, when they need it.

*from "A Poet's Trademark: Magic, Illusion, and Other Realities"*

## **HANNAH HARRIS**

**(photo unavailable)**

In 1955 my mother, Marguerite, was accepted at the Poetry Society of America on the basis of her poem "Off Amsterdam." There was a formal dinner and she made my father get dressed up in his tux and bought a thrift shop rag of an evening dress that my father made her exchange for something nicer. He had a particular dislike for the pretensions of poets. But she was so proud.

Not long after she said the Poetry Society were "a bunch of fuddy-duddies". She began to see herself as an expert on poetry and on occasion was known to tell poets that they should forget about writing because they had absolutely no talent. She had strict standards about what constituted an "artist."

It was around this time that she began to make a lot of money in television commercials. The modern poet, who could recite volumes of poetry from memory, had a horrible time memorizing three lines for a commercial, and family life ground to a halt while the process was going on. Eventually she got so spoiled that she turned down commercials with lines, and lost out on huge amounts of money. Money never interested her very much.

She discovered the Deux Megots poetry readings while I was in high school and rebelling against modeling and anything else I could think of. Maggie, as she liked to be called, was in her



sixties. I remember her telling me that she had tried pot one evening, but it had no effect.

“Grandma Hip,” I used to call her. Allen Ginsberg and Ed Sanders were her adopted sons, and I had to wonder what they thought of that honor. (When I heard **The Fugs** play I was laughing so hard it was almost a religious experience.) I know Grandma Hip had great admiration for Jackson Mac Low and Paul Blackburn. She “respected”—her word for people she disliked—Carol Bergé. Diane Wakoski and Susan Sherman hung around the house until they got tired of being told what to do.

My mother was corresponding with poets all over the world and in 1963 she organized the Woodstock poetry readings. My friends and I were put to work on the weekends tacking up posters all over town, which we did with much grumbling and bad grace. Whatever was young and new was interesting to her, but when I brought my own beatnik boyfriend home she scolded me because his nails were dirty.

*a folk-rock band, The Fugs was formed circa 1965  
by Ed Sanders and Tuli Kupferberg*

## **SERGE GAVRONSKY**

The apartment on Avenue C was a clean house with an elevator and no cockroaches. And, facing the single bedroom: a diChirico red brick walled warehouse in front of which one could walk around naked. There was something positively Uptown about the place! Anne-Marie and I did not have a “pad” and no, we did not throw our mattress on the floor or stay up nights smoking pot. (What’s more, I did not get invited to Elaine deKooning’s parties. And no, I did not fuck around on my wife.) I had to earn my living and taught remedial reading at 500 Fifth Avenue in a

sub-sub basement where the air was piped in along with Muzak. I was also trying to finish my doctoral dissertation.

A few blocks away, Meg Randall's place. Her baby son eating cigarette butts. She cuddled his hand. She's packing. She was packing in her mind. "We're going to Mexico," she said. "This country's out of its mind; you're going to blow up the world." She went on her odyssey. From danger to danger. We stayed on 10th street for the readings. And the bomb...?

New Year's Day party at Carol Bergé's on Second Avenue. Was it 1964? My daughter Adriane playing ball with Allen Ginsberg. Someone made the strategic mistake of introducing him to me as someone with Columbia ties. All of a sudden Allen said to me, "Say hello to Lionel" (or Diana or whomever), and then (I'm reeling as I remember!) he listed esoteric works of mystical writers that I had never read and he well knew this! India under his cuticles. A library pass so often used that now the books had become the blood of his being, the flesh of his mind, the extension of his arms. The ball dropped – before my daughter could get to it, Peter Orlovsky grabbed it and handed it to her.

*ex-pat Margaret Randall published Latin and Village writers in her bilingual poetry journal from Mexico before returning to the chaos she'd left in Manhattan to teach*



### **STEVE KOWIT**

The fellow I secretly considered the most talented poet I'd ever heard at Deux Megots had moved into the apartment right next door to mine — Dan Cassidy. He was an Irish prettyboy who could have posed for any Norman Rockwell cover, a preppy-looking kid given to tweed jackets and white bucks. He'd been a lightweight boxer at Cornell, was a talented clarinet player, and a fast talker with a weakness for the white thighs of the uptown young women of Manhattan. The girls were always ravishing uptown coeds who never seemed to mind the long climb up and down those six flights. There was always one or another of them going up or coming down those stairs, smiling demurely and adjusting her skirt...

Cassidy's other passion was Mao Dze Dong. He'd drop over to my place next door just about every day to rhapsodize about the Long March and Mao's heroic vision of Permanent Revolution. Cassidy would pace my little living room ranting about both the Chinese Revolution of the past and the American revolution to come. His bible was Mao's Little Red Book and his catechism was the Progressive Labor Party's weekly tabloid *Challenge*. A fallen-away Catholic, he had the fervor of the newly converted. He'd stick a finger in the air, pointing at heaven, and sing the praises of the Cultural Revolution. He'd work himself into a froth stamping back and forth, raging with an endlessly inventive barrage of invective against the contradictions of U.S. imperialism and its satanic thugs. Usually Cassidy would end his harangues by borrowing five bucks. Then he'd shake his head, a bit exhausted from the workout, and say "Kowit, it's a pisser!"

Cassidy once brought a friend named Herbert Huncke around to my place. They waited for me for an hour or two but had left by the time I got home. Afterward, I could never find the gold pocket watch my ex-girlfriend Rozzie had bought me — aside from my typewriter, it was my most prized possession.



**CLIVE MATSON**

**(photo by Erin Black Matson)**

Fuck you, Huncke.

Leave me

hung up for junk, waiting

alone in a dark room candles

you lit burn down in.

They unwind curls of smoke

like incense I remember we offered  
weeks ago.

It is Nostalgia.

*from Clive's oft-reprinted "Teardrop in My Eye"*



**JUDITH MALINA**

(photo courtesy of Michael W. Smith)

Rochelle Owens’ “Futz” was in rehearsal on the set of Ken Brown’s “The Brig” when the feds came in and shut down the theatre on October 17, 1963. A spectacle ensued, the poets and artists surrounded the theatre – their theatre. The police set up lines with horses. My husband Julian Beck called out from the second-story window that there would be a performance that evening for those who could make it past the police barricades. Ladders were brought from other off-Broadway theatres and thrown up to the windows. The public climbed up over the roof as the police tried to pull them down. We gave our final performance on 14th Street and at the end of the play, the police carried us from “The Brig” set into the paddy wagons and the downtown lock-up.

*this brash comedy by Rochelle Owens broke taboo with farmer Futz loving a pig; its metaphors also inspired a failed feature film in 1968*

**STEVE CANNON**

As the civil rights movement crept north, the debate became over who was baddest: Martin Luther King, Jr. or Malcolm X. Those were our marching tunes. Riots, rallies, mass demonstrations, protests against the police and ongoing heavy political debates were everywhere you went, but especially on the downtown scene. Most of the folks were definitely on the left, save for the Ukrainians, Puerto Ricans, and blacks who were more indigenous to the

neighborhood. The artists were leftists, mostly died-in-the-wool Marxists when I got down here:  
“Free grass for the working class,” as according to a poem by Pedro Pietri.

The rent was so low, you could get an entire apartment for \$40 a month. People worked about three days a week and after rent and utilities, we still had enough left over to go out eating and hang out in bars and create whatever we wanted.

*Pedro Pietri, an impoverished and outspoken poet, was popular with the Village masses at Nuyorican Poets Café and St. Mark’s before advocating safe-sex during the 1990s*



### **PEDRO PIETRI**

Imagine you in the library of congress  
Imagine you in the local bookstores  
Imagine total strangers coming up to you  
For you to autograph your book for them  
Imagine the dinner invitations at midtown  
Manhattan plush hotels with real writers  
Imagine the intellectual book parties  
Imagine the lectures at universities  
Imagine the panel shows on television  
Imagine the reviews and interviews about you  
Imagine the stage lights and microphone  
Imagine the audience clapping for more  
Imagine your friends talking about you  
To their friends and their friends’ friends  
Imagine your dead English teacher saying  
I always knew that boy will be somebody  
Imagine you holding a press conference  
To praise night & day those who helped  
You get your book of unpunctuated poetry  
Out of the closet into the classroom

*from Pedro’s poem “42nd Second”*

## **ROBERT BRUCE NEWMAN**

The solo exhibits at Gain Ground Gallery drew conflicting reviews from local art critics. The first, my **Rooms with Electric Mirrors**, showed the obedience in which you moved through eight mirrored chambers with different themes. The next exhibition, by John Giorno, consisted of a parachute-canopy under which you sat on cushions with other gallery-goers and listened to an audio collage of planetary and psychological babble. The third, John Perreault's **Word Room**, had you enter a tiny space that projected slides with cut-up word arrangements on all four screens at once while a sound recording played suggestive word permutations. And then came **Room Piece** by Vito Acconci, which stretched the performance artist's living space into Gain Ground, creating for you the impression that gallery, city and home space were all one.

In 1970, a planned exhibition of my **Power Throne** was cancelled elsewhere, and I opened it at Gain Ground. A respected art curator, Jim Harithas, flew in, and he later told me that after experiencing *Power Throne* he gave a lecture at Hunter College, saying the show was "a turning point in art history, a major change of perspective." (Detailed reviews in **Art International**, **ARTnews**, and **Arts Magazine** echoed his enthusiasm.)

In the show two priestesses in ruby dresses sat you in the power throne and placed on your chest a red velvet sash concealing an electronic stethoscope. You heard your heart beat coming from four speakers in the walls of the chamber. The sound system (by Phillips Electronics) was designed by **Norman Dolph** of Columbia Records, and emitted an immediately perceptible

feedback field. Then priestesses placed headphones (by Koss) over your ears. After a minute a voice, in harmonic compression (by Bell Labs), entered the electronic mix of your heartbeat at twice the speed of normal speech:

WHO KNOWS WHAT'S WORKING, MIRACLES RED ALL LIVE IN YOU...  
WHAT RUNS YOUR ORGANS GLEAMING WITH WHAT THEY DO...  
WHO KNOWS WHAT ELECTRIC LIQUIDS CREATE IN YOUR HEAD...  
THE UNIVERSE IS EMPTY WITH WHATEVER BEAT YOU HAVE...  
HAVE YOU EVER FELT YOUR HEART VIBRATE SUPERNATURAL TISSUES...  
YOU MUST BE THE ONE WHO'S ALIVE IN YOUR HEART IN THE THROBBING...  
THE BLOODFLESH OF YOU MAKES ITS CORONARY MAJESTY, SO WHATEVER YOU  
CAN CATCH YOUR HEART WITH YOU BETTER GET.

*after graduating from Yale, Norman Dolph arranged early disco  
at The Dom, professionally recorded The Velvet Underground,  
and mapped soundscapes for art installations*

## **RONALD TAVEL**

One November evening in '64 while I was reading, Andy Warhol appeared with a small entourage, in search of voices he would need now as he shifted from the making of silent to sound films. Gerard Malanga, at that time the artist's right-hand man, had asked him to fall by at my reading. Andy listened to me with patience and when I was finished sent the proverbial embossed card to my table asking me to join him at his. When I made my way through the crowd to where he was sitting, he smiled, suddenly shook my hand and, without further ado, popped the time-tested, Wanna be in movies?

Later he explained it was a certain voice-over-sound he was looking for, someone to read, preferably the telephone directory, while his "screenography" of Jean Harlow, to be christened HARLOT, unreeled. He told me that whatever I chose to read or perhaps improvise should not



be even indirectly related to what was to be seen, but that my hushed underbreath would function instead as the appropriate accompaniment to the whatever on-screen. It was as an actor of sorts then that I entered underground cinema and not a writer: that was still several months off.

And so my serious involvement with the Manhattan poetry scene came to an end and my days of acting, directing and scripting began. My writing of poems fizzled as well as the pressure on me to produce more scripts more and more rapidly and often lengthy essays documenting them increased. I tried to keep up my attendance at the readings, and my friendships with the poets to whom I was now rather close, but when in the summer of '65 and as a direct spinoff of my involvement with film, I opened **The Theatre of the Ridiculous**, there was no longer much time.

***The Theatre of the Ridiculous** has since become its own genre of surreal, shocking, hyperbolic or gender-bending stage performance*

## **ROBERT BRUCE NEWMAN**

After Naomi Dash and I lost the gallery lease, Gain Ground continued to produce events at spaces in New York City. **Hannah Weiner at her Job** featured the poetess earning a living as a lingerie designer. At the Chelsea hotel we did **Eleanor Antin's Portraits of Eight New York Women**, which used objects to portray living people. In SoHo, at the Cinematheque Movie Theater, we produced an evening of films by poets, painters and musicians; and then a performance piece, **Invisible Energy Dictates a Dance**, by Juan Downey, which used invisible energy detection equipment that signaled performers how and where to move.

Several planned works fell through after that, including my own work on a new lighting system called **Solar Torch**, for the Statue of Liberty. The project included professor Rick Sharpe of the Princeton math department, and artist Auturo Cuetara, and was backed by and then dropped two years later by the Department of the Interior.

My last project before leaving New York in 1972 was a collaboration that celebrated inseparable light and time titled **Optical Sundial**. The sundial consisted of a 36 inch diameter circular mirror with a finely cut lucite prism rising from its center, made precisely for its location in Livingston Manor. The work was captured on a 16 minute film by Phil Niblock, and is posted online.

*caught between minimalism and trending politics, Eleanor Antin's conceptual art plausibly inspired Yoko Ono and other Fluxus artists; later her installations gained international appeal*

*Robert thanks the New Museum's "Alternatives In Retrospect," curated by Jackie Apple in 1981; their catalogue was his source for the above data*

## **HANNAH HARRIS**

I knew at a very early age that my mother, Marguerite, was different. She could be the sweetest, most loving person. My father met her at a club in the Village when she was still married to her second husband when he made up his mind he was going to marry her. In those years she slept in old evening gowns. She was forty-six and already a grandmother. After I was born she went through something called a "change of life" which meant that she was having a nervous breakdown all the time. That was supposed to explain the way she behaved.

When I was three or four she wrote a poem to me, “Little Birdeen”. Then she started something like a poetry class for little girls and the object of the “Poetry Party” was to memorize a poem each week and the best reciter would get a prize. What with her corny poetry, my father’s penchant for sculpting nude snow sculptures on the front lawn, and the fact that we avoided any church, it was difficult being their kid. I think some parents sent their kids to see what the Harris weirdos were up to.

*a few lines from Marguerite: “Little birdeen,  
Ah, my little white dove,/Come nestle here,  
In the boughs of my love”*



### **KIRBY CONGDON**

In the new poetry scenes on the East and West coasts, there were few power-hungry doers and shakers. There were individuals who got readings going, sometimes got posters made, and who negotiated for time and space at the coffee houses. No person, however, could claim authority or other control in any social or literary way. Those who did have control were involved with scholastic publications, none of which could afford to recognize the more democratic plateaus of the great unwashed. A definition of the professionally-recognized literati could be: those who can only afford to admit you exist when they are sure you no longer need such recognition. I find this is still true today.

This attitude, of course, comes from a fairly long tradition of competition peculiar to America. Fostered first by the advertising business in the late Victorian era, this approach consisted then,

as it does now, of blandly asserting that their academic product superceded any other. This tacit assumption was transferred to academia by our acceptance of rank: good, better, best. The schools require this approach to prove their financial standing for any inquiry from the public. Everything must be graded, charted and classified...

The Coffee-House Movement and the Mimeograph Revolution were necessary antidotes to this narrow, egotistical and paternal tradition that was so much in power in setting literary standards in the two decades after World War II. I am not opposed to standards, taste, and sophisticated judgments, but if, in getting these, overall literary activity itself is ignored or denied, it keeps us culturally provincial. Yet well-established literati still hang on to the competitive hierarchies in literature as though the habit were a security blanket. The result is that they cannot give a kind word toward the activity of non-academic poets unless that word enhances their own position of divine authority and personal glory. The fear inherent behind their reservations only helps set that cement of provincialism which we have been trying to chip off since the early nineteenth century.

We who read at the coffee houses were keenly aware of scholastic skepticism, if not antagonism, toward our grass-roots movement. I remember a swarthy writer named Jack Micheline deriding a poet who read her poem from a magazine in which the poem had been printed. He felt it was not only playing it overly safe in one's exposure to public reactions, but that it was pretentious for the poet to assert that she had had work accepted under professional auspices. Does it matter who

was correct? What matters is that we all cared about poetry, whatever our private opinions about this incident may have been.

## **CAROL BERGÉ**

One theory has it that writers evolve because people ignored their ideas or misunderstood them when they were young; they became **readers**, people who went to books for company and solace; hence they turned early to putting their thoughts on paper. As Guy de Maupassant had it, “An artist needs opposition.” **One writer** of the East Village group suggested going to Woolworth’s to buy a tin wastebasket and then paper it on the outside with a collage of rejection slips they had received, and then lacquer it, and give it to a young writer who is just coming up.

On a practical basis, many connections toward publication came from the coffeehouse readings. Someone – a fellow writer, an agent, an editor – would hear a piece read and approach the poet, playwright, or novelist afterward and offer an invitation toward publication in a magazine or to share their talent in a group performance piece. That spontaneous connection was every writer’s dream. And the venue where this occurred was the catalyst for transformation from the dream to reality.

*the idea to decoupage a wastebasket is universal*

## **STEVE KOWIT**

Among the most magical people who’d drop by my apartment those days was the sister of Cassidy’s other roommate **Kenny Rubin**. **Barbara** would come by my place with her girlfriend Rosebud and we’d sit around and chat. Barbara was one of the great underground filmmakers of

the era and one of the mainstays of the Kerista Movement, the free love society that apparently still exists.

I would have liked to have gotten close to Barbara but I was a little intimidated. The Kerista thing probably scared me off. Many years later, up in his Broome Street studio, Lenny Silverberg told me that Barbara had become an orthodox Jew, gotten married and died in childbirth.

*a friend of Allen Ginsberg and filmmaker Jonas Mekas, Barbara Rubin is also the woman massaging Bob Dylan's neck on the flipside of his 1965 electric/acoustic album, **Bringing it all Back Home.***



## BARBARA RUBIN

(photo by Jonas Mekas)

Moving pictures belong to the Muses-- like painting, like poetry, like music, like dance, like any other art. Big or small, good or bad, expensive or cheap, "Cleopatra" or "Flaming Creatures"---- they all belong to the muses. They are all attempts to give man something beautiful.

Licensing of works of art is immoral, silly and

unconstitutional.

That's what we want people to know.

The main reason for licensing shadows is (they say) to protect people from obscenity in films.

That is very nice hypocritical reasoning.

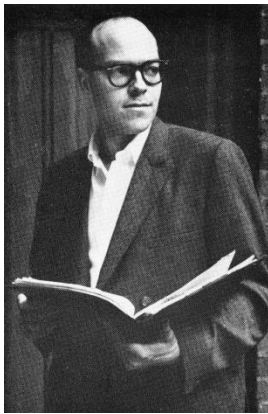
We are grown-up people and need no civic and bureaucratic mommies and daddies to protect our morals any longer.

Do not baby the people.

It is beautiful to be a child; but it is pretty sick to be childish!!

Let all lives be free.  
Let all art be free.  
Let all expressions be free.  
Let man blossom.

*Barbara's flyer, "DECLARATION FOR THE FREEDOM OF THE BLACK AND WHITE AND TECHNICOLOR SHADOWS (2mm, 4mm, 8mm, 16mm, 35mm, 70mm, 150mm, 1,000mm, 1,000,000mm)," featured a pen & ink butterfly, and promoted a demonstration at Radio City Music Hall that was organized by Film-makers of the People on May 23, 1964*



**ALLEN KATZMAN**

**(photo of twin Don, by Ed Druck)**

Dear Carol,

Have had a busy two weeks. It seems the Spring of '85 is my year to surface socially again. After 10 years of hibernation, I feel like Rip Van, everything familiar but strange. Only younger versions of ghosts seem to haunt this place now. I was back down at 10th Street & Avenue A at a place called The Life Café (Blake was right—everything is imaginatively alive) –Tuli and Jim Brode read. Tuli is still his beautiful self, and even younger-looking. A young poet named John Godsey (?) asked me to start **EVO** again. “Yeah?” I said. “Ya got \$100,000?”

He mentioned that everything down here seemed like the 1960s again, except for one important missing ingredient. At first I thought he meant the spirit was missing. But when I thought about it, what it was was a mythological naivety. Last week Jim Brode and I were talking about the St. Marks Poetry Scene and he said, “Those people who run it now think it all started with Anne Waldman. They forget that Paul Blackburn brought it over from Le Metro. In fact, they no longer remember that a poet named Joel Oppenheimer nurtured it after that.” History gives short shrift to poets like Anne Waldman. Joel is sickly now, and feels forgotten, as Jim’s statement seems to imply.

One more thing. I joined the Poetry Society of America recently. I attended their awards ceremony last week. Twenty-five years later, it was the same funeral. Serge thinks the history of the Deux Megots poets is going to break like a dam once everybody realizes how everyone is bored with what they’ve been recycling for the last 10 years. I’ve started to write about the time I read with Paul Blackburn and W.H. Auden to raise money for Marion Tanner’s brownstone on

Bank Street, a haven and halfway house for struggling artists and street people back in the 1960s. I told the story to Serge when I ran into him on Broadway and he thought it was wonderful.

*from 1965-1972, the “sleazy” East Village Other competed with the established Village Voice; this letter is dated May 5, 1985*



### **NORMAN DOLPH**

Back in 1966, I had started what was the first mobile disco in the New York area, for all I know the first one in America... That’s how I first met Warhol. I had done parties for him and parties for his dealer, and that sort of thing. And propitiously in those cases rather than taking cash, I took a little picture. I’ve always been an art collector, and I am now, and so I would do opening parties and loft parties and all kinds of things in exchange for works of art. When they did the thing at **the Dom**, they used me to do the sound in between the sets of the Velvet Underground. The Velvet Underground would have fairly long sets, as I recall, and I would play disco in between for twenty to thirty minutes, something like that. So that is how I first encountered the group, doing the in-between music at the sets at the Dom.

At the Dom, it was really effective in terms of the layout. You had an impression of a light show as something totally revolutionary independent of the music. But the music was clearly without precedent. I don’t think I or anybody had heard anything like it. My own reaction, it would have to be just, “My god, what is this?” Because the whole experience, between the music and the lights and Gerard Malanga with the whip...he would carry around a 16-millimeter projection, a



huge actual projector, and shoot images on other people and on the wall. If the word “psychedelic” had any meaning at all, that’s what it was.

*the Dom was at St. Marks Place in the East Village; it was the location of “The Exploding Plastic Inevitable”; more on this topic can be found in Richie Unterberger’s book, **White Lightning/White Heat: The Velvet Underground Day-By-Day** (Jawbone Press, 2009)*

### DENISE LEVERTOV



(photo courtesy of the Estate)

Being the child of a socially conscious family, conscience and circumstance virtually forced me into the politics of the anti-war movement of the 1960s and on into the broader anti-nuclear, environmental, and social justice concerns which evolved from it, so that I found myself frequently acting as apologist for “engaged” writing in response to external demands as well as (initially) to explain to myself what I was doing. Thus I have spent a lot of time attempting to define what qualities can make “political” poetry work as poetry, to defend such poetry from attacks made from a position of rigid, general aesthetic objection rather than on a case by case basis, and to point out the honorable precedents for such literary “engagement.” But this didactic role (which, once having taken on, I probably shall never be able to avoid) was undertaken as a further obligation of social conscience, not from personal choice; for my underlying interest has always been elsewhere. The tragic and fearful character of our times is not something from which we can detach ourselves; we are in it, as fish are in the sea, whether we speak about it in our poems or not. Sometimes the nagging, unceasing ache of a keen

awareness of current history and of its impact on one's daily life deflects one's energies away from creative work; at other times it may stimulate them, and some of the results may be of lasting value. But more and more, what I have sought as a reading writer, is a poetry that, while it does not attempt to ignore or deny the ocean of crisis in which we swim, is itself "on pilgrimage," as it were, in search of significance underneath and beyond the succession of temporal events.

*from "Some Affinities of Content," a chapter in  
New and Selected Essays (New Direction, 1992)  
by Denise Levertov*



### MARGARET RANDALL

Yes we did march around somewhere and yes it was cold  
we shared our gloves because we had a pair between us  
and a New York City cop also shared his big gloves with me  
--strange, he was there to keep our order  
and he could do that and I could take that back then.

We were marching for the Santa Maria,  
a Portuguese ship whose crew had mutinied.  
They demanded asylum in Goulart's Brazil  
and we marched in support of that demand

in winter in New York City, back and forth  
before the Portuguese consulate  
Rockefeller Center 1961.

I gauge the date by my first child  
--Gregory was born late in 1960--  
as I gauge so many dates  
by the first the second the third the fourth  
and I feel his body now again, close to my breast  
held against cold to our strong steps of dignity.

*from Meg's poem, dedicated to good friend Rhoda, "The Gloves"*