

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: WRITING WITH IMAGE: VERBAL-VISUAL
COLLABORATION IN 20th-CENTURY POETRY

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English

This study examines verbal-visual collaboration in which a poet and a visual artist work cooperatively to produce a single book. Verbal-visual collaboration is a fertile genre that refigures the historically oppositional relationship between the sister arts and that anticipates today's hypertext experiments in interart forms. I confront the problem of reading a multi-media text and posit "integrated reading" as a constructive critical approach that privileges neither word nor image. Integrated reading stresses relationships and asks questions about how the verbal and visual elements interact, what they say to and about each other, and how they work together to interrogate issues of representation. Examining the nature of poetry from the stance of images, and vice versa, means questioning the nature of representation itself. A central concern of verbal-visual collaborations, and modern poetry, is representation. My integrated readings consider issues of representation demonstrated in the process, presentation, and meaning-making of verbal-visual collaborations.

My dissertation has two other goals: to begin to write the history of modern verbal-visual collaboration and to develop a taxonomy of such projects. I focus on three texts: Ted Hughes and Leonard Baskin's *Capriccio* (1990), Frank O'Hara and Larry Rivers' *Stones* (1957-1960), and C.D. Wright and Deborah Luster's *One Big Self*:

Prisoners of Louisiana (2004). I trace the specific histories of these works to position each within the history of verbal-visual collaboration and to show how the creative process bears on reading a collaborative text. I describe categories of collaboration based on the working proximity of artist and poet and their relationship to material production, and my taxonomy provides a beginning for classifying the various ways in which poets interact with visual images.

Within this historical context, my chapters focus on integrated readings that illuminate the ways in which poets and artists question the limits of representation, interrogate accepted modes of representation, and struggle with the ethical dilemmas of representation. In my conclusion I argue that a more complete understanding of verbal-visual collaboration provides insight into the visual strategies and material concerns of 20th-century poets.

WRITING WITH IMAGE: VERBAL-VISUAL COLLABORATION
IN 20TH-CENTURY POETRY

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*In memory of my mother, Beth Bridges Hammond
1940-2000*

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Introduction: Collaborative Persistence

Overview

The Modernist period of poetry saw an explosion of interest in the visual arts—an interest that continued into Postmodernism and persists today—as poets engaged the sister art in their poems, either in the form of ekphrasis or as technical models. Ezra Pound, for example, critiqued the influence of Pre-Raphaelite artists in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*; William Carlos Williams both analyzed and replicated Brueghel’s paintings in *Pictures from Brueghel*; Wallace Stevens used Cubist technique in “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” “Study of Two Pears,” and “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”; and Marianne Moore employed collage, landscape portraiture, and pictorial narrative in “The Steeple-Jack,” “Marriage,” and “Charity Overcoming Envy.”

One consequence of such intense interest in the relationship between poetry and the visual arts is verbal-visual collaboration in which a poet and a visual artist work in cooperation. While collaboration was not a new idea among the Modernists—the term “collaboration” dates to the late nineteenth century and indicates, broadly, joint intellectual work—the Modernist period marked a turning point in the way poets viewed the influence of the visual arts on their work, leading to verbal-visual collaborations then and now that interrogate the relationship between poetry and the visual arts as media of representation. The years since the rise of Modernism have seen such varied verbal-visual collaborations as Langston Hughes and Helen Sewell’s *The Dream Keeper and other poems* (1932), Robert Creeley and Dan Rice’s *All that is lovely in men* (1955),

Thom and Ander Gunn's *Positives* (1967), Mark Strand and Josef Albers' *Prose* (1987), Charles Bernstein and Susan Bee's *Little Orphan Anagram* (1997), Jorie Graham and Jeanette Montgomery Barron's *Photographs & Poems* (1998), John Ashbery and Joe Brainard's *The Vermont Notebook* (2001), Rodney Phillips and John Jurayj's *Five Poems/Five Paintings* (2003), and Gary Snyder and Tom Killion's *Tamalpais Walking: Poetry, History, and Prints* (2009).¹

Despite such activity and the fact that it has continued, even accelerated, throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, to date critical work in this field has been scant. Critics such as Johanna Drucker and Marjorie Perloff have touched on the importance of verbal-visual collaboration in 20th-century poetry; however, no full-length study has examined these collaborations. What attention there is to collaboration has been paid to collaborations among writers. Jack Stillinger, in *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius*, raises the central issue of the frequency with which collaboration occurs within literary circles. Focusing on illuminating the “importance of

¹ Other notable verbal-visual collaborations include Charles Olson and Corrado Cagli's *Y & X* (1948), Frank O'Hara and Norman Bluhm's *Poem-Paintings* (1960), Ted Berrigan and Joe Brainard's *Living with Chris* (1960), John Hollander and Reginald Pollack's *The Quest of the Gole* (1966), Ron Padgett and George Schneeman's *Yodeling Into a Kotex* (1969), Ted Hughes and Leonard Baskin's *Cave Birds: An Alchemical Cave Drama* (1978), Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Janet Morgan's *The Sea & Ourselves at Cape Ann* (1979), Denise Levertov and Liebe Coolidge's *Pig Dreams: Scenes from the Life of Sylvia* (1981), Dana Gioia and Fulvio Testa's *Journeys in Sunlight* (1986), William Stafford and Christy Hale's *How to Hold Your Arms When It Rains* (1990), C.D. Wright and Deborah Luster's *Lost Roads Project: A Walk-in Book of Alabama* (1994), Anthony Hecht and Leonard Baskin's *Presumptions of Death* (1995), Jerome Rothenberg and David Rathman's *Pictures of the Crucifixion* (1996), Anne Waldman and George Schneeman's *Homage to Allen G* (1997), Susan Howe and Susan Bee's *Bed Hangings* (2001), Leslie Scalapino and Marina Adams's *The Tango* (2001), Bob Perelman and Francie Shaw's *Playing Bodies* (2004), and Maureen Owen and Yvonne Jacquette's *Erosion's Pull* (2004). In 2001, Saturnalia Books, located in Ardmore, Pennsylvania, was established, in part, “to encourage collaborations between poets and visual artists, particularly in book form.” See their website: www.saturnaliabooks.com.

historical authorship to our reading, understanding, and appreciation of a literary text,”² Stillinger calls attention to acknowledged collaborators such as Pound and Eliot and unacknowledged collaborators such as John Stuart Mill and Harriet Mill. Wayne Koestenbaum, in *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration*, affirms the numerous instances of collaboration in literary history, but his project centers on illuminating one important feature of multiple authorship: that collaboration among male writers is motivated by a need “to separate homoeroticism from the sanctioned male bonding that upholds patriarchy,”³ and that “double authorship attacks not primarily our dogmas of literary property, but of sexual propriety.”⁴ Because both of these critics are concerned with collaboration as defined by the cooperative work of two or more people, the weight of their inquiry falls on the process of partnership, which they argue opens new possibilities for interpretation. Thomas Jensen Hines, however, focuses on collaboration as defined by the inclusion of more than one art in an artistic endeavor, and, consequently, the weight of his inquiry is on characterizing the components of collaborative artifacts.⁵ As these three works illustrate, most discussions of collaboration tend to focus either on the contributors or the media. Here I seek to combine the two, to focus on the contributors and the media, and on the process and the product, in order to

² Jack Stillinger, *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 22.

³ Wayne Koestenbaum, *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 3.

⁴ Ibid. 9.

⁵ Thomas Jensen Hines, *Collaborative Form: Studies in the Relations of the Arts* (Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1991).

show how these collaborative texts refigure the historically oppositional relationship between the sister arts and challenge our processes of reading multi-media art forms.

Because verbal-visual collaborations have received little attention in terms of their place within the trajectory of modern poetry and in terms of their challenges to traditional critical reading practices, there is much to be done. No single study can fill the void, but as a jumping off point I propose to begin to write the history of modern verbal-visual collaboration by focusing on the work of three pairs of prominent collaborators working in the second half of the 20th century; to develop a taxonomy of verbal-visual collaboration, based on archival research that seeks to expose the processes of specific collaborations; and to establish, through close readings of three verbal-visual collaborations, the necessity for and strategies of what I call “integrated reading,” a process that stresses relationships and asks questions about how the verbal and visual elements interact with each other, what they say to and about each other, and how they work together to interrogate issues of representation. My study of verbal-visual collaborations will focus on three texts, each representing a different collaborative process: Ted Hughes and Leonard Baskin’s *Capriccio* (1990), Frank O’Hara and Larry Rivers’ *Stones* (1957-1960), and C.D. Wright and Deborah Luster’s *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* (2004).

History of Verbal-Visual Collaboration

Verbal-visual collaborations are the tangible product of the intersection between the sister arts and of the impulse to collaborate that has a long history in the arts. Modernist interest in the relationship between poetry and the visual arts is rooted in earlier increased interest in the material text and an underlying paradigm shift that W. J.

T. Mitchell has termed “the pictorial turn.”⁶ The Modernist poets inherited an intense interest, which they passed on to Postmodernists, in the visual arts and in collaborative forms from the Symbolists and the Arts and Crafts movement of the 19th-century, and the French, Italian, and Russian avant-garde activities of the early 20th-century. As Johanna Drucker points out, the avant-garde activity at this time overtly rejected 19th-century aesthetic ideals of the Symbolists and the Arts and Crafts movement, both of which were concerned with the possibilities of the material text and the mixing of artistic forms.

“Nonetheless,” Drucker writes,

many traits of early 20th-century avant-garde activity betray links to both Symbolist and Arts and Crafts precedents. These include a highly self-conscious attention to materials, the conviction that the form of the book, the layout of the page, and the quality of the image were as much an aspect of communication as was the thematic content of the work. Another carryover was an interest in hybrid forms produced as the result of interrelations among artistic forms.⁷

Additionally, Modernist poets were influenced by renewed interest in fine press publishing, itself a collaborative enterprise, in the 19th-century, and, beginning in the late 19th-century, the production of *livres d’artiste*, finely wrought books that “bore the name of a rising or established star in the work of visual arts or poetry,”⁸ and that featured a

⁶ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994) 11-34.

⁷ Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books* (New York City: Granary Books, 1995) 45-46.

⁸ *Ibid.* 3.

“mechanical repetition of the conventional distinction between image and text”⁹ in the tradition of the illustrated book.

This flurry of activity in fine printing and in avant-garde movements seeking to highlight the relationship among the arts might naturally be traced to William Blake—printer, poet, artist—but the years intervening between Blake’s visionary art and the mid-nineteenth century were marked by a utilitarianism that seems to have obscured his contributions to the arts, at least for those writers and artists seeking inspiration during the Victorian era. Just such a group of artists, headed by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, came together in 1848 to found the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which actively opposed Victorian academic styles of both art and poetry. The Pre-Raphaelites advocated a return to forms more in line with nature, based primarily on the aesthetic philosophy of John Ruskin, and, in part, their proposed methods were more detailed representation and a renewed relationship between the sister arts. Of even greater importance to the history of verbal-visual collaboration was the addition of William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Morris and Burne-Jones shared the brotherhood’s ideals, but it was Morris’s belief that the beauty of art derives from the artist’s pleasure in his work that fueled the brotherhood’s innovative experiments in verbal-visual relationships, printing, and design.

Based in part on his reading of Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice*, Morris felt that artists were “compelled to look back to the Middle Ages for models and inspiration, though mere imitation of medieval art was to be discouraged.”¹⁰ The medieval Gothic

⁹ Ibid. 4.

¹⁰ William S. Peterson, *The Kelmscott Press* (Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1991) 43.

style typified, for Ruskin and then for Morris, a model of aesthetic beauty because of its “statement about workmen in the fourteenth century: their labor was undivided, they were skilled as stonemasons, carvers, and so forth rather than specialists on a small aspect of the job who were thus prevented from having a sense of the total endeavor.”¹¹ Morris’s conviction that the social and aesthetic qualities of art were interconnected led him in 1861 to form the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., which also included Rossetti as a partner.¹² The firm specialized in furniture making and products considered “lesser” arts, such as stained glass, tiles, carpets, tapestries, and wallpaper, of which Morris was a skilled designer. In his firm Morris strove to implement his beliefs about unifying the arts and providing workers with the control over production that would make their work pleasurable (and their products beautiful).¹³ Morris may not have transformed the production of household goods in late nineteenth century England, but he came close. His accomplishments as a designer, craftsman, writer, artist, and advocate for workers inspired the formation of the Art Workers Guild in 1884, a group intended to initiate collaborative assistance among artists and craftsmen—their motto was “Art is Unity.”¹⁴ The flourishing of the Arts and Crafts movement, as demonstrated by the founding of the Art Workers Guild and the later Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, can be traced to Morris’s association with the Pre-Raphaelites:

¹¹ Peter Stansky, *Redesigning the World: William Morris, the 1880s, and the Arts and Crafts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) 30.

¹² *Ibid.* 40.

¹³ *Ibid.* 41-44.

¹⁴ Peterson 73.

Ruskin and Morris had long believed in breaking down barriers in the arts, not least because such barriers could be used as indications of class and ways of making social distinctions. The Arts and Crafts movement challenged the snobbery inherent in this sort of thinking and sought to establish a more rewarding relation of the worker to his work and ultimately to society.¹⁵

Morris's emphasis on craftsmen controlling the means of production, in part a reaction to industrialization's alienation of the worker and in part a natural consequence of following Ruskin's philosophy, not only had a profound impact on emerging avant-garde activity but remains today a fundamental part of verbal-visual collaboration. Morris's influence on verbal-visual collaboration did not stop with the Arts and Crafts movement, but I will reserve discussion of his book making activities and return to Morris as a fine printing influence.

At the same time that the Pre-Raphaelites and members of the Arts and Crafts movement were challenging conventional aesthetic styles, the French Symbolists were acting on Charles Baudelaire's Aesthetic Movement, based on his philosophy of making the invisible visible through using words as symbols. A direct lineage can be mapped from Baudelaire to Stéphane Mallarmé, the leader of the Symbolists, who rejected narrative in favor of the power of the image, and on to a host of avant-garde movements. Along one line, Paul Valéry's experiments with vivid images led to Ezra Pound's Imagism. Along another, Guillaume Apollinaire's calligrammes and his close ties with visual artists led to Cubism, Futurism, Vorticism, and, later, Concrete Poetry. Along yet another André Breton and Paul Eluard led to Surrealism and Dada. While each of these movements had its own "manifesto," they were all invested in verbal-visual

¹⁵ Stansky 119.

experimentation. Pound's Imagist tenets "stressed the physical properties of objects" and "the physical placement of words on the page."¹⁶ Later, Pound's appropriation of Vorticism, an offshoot of Italian Futurism, would do even more to exploit the visual possibilities of poetry "by taking the poem off the page and into the realm of physical gesture."¹⁷ Cubists and Surrealists both practiced verbal-visual collage, and while Cubists focused their interests on visual arrangement on the page, the Surrealists and Dadaists practiced collaborative automatic writing. The Surrealists and Cubists had perhaps the most profound influence on Modernist poetry. Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot both utilized fragmentation. Eliot, Pound, and Marianne Moore all used collage. William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens experimented with multiple perspectives. e.e. cummings appropriated experimental typography, a practice the Cubists borrowed from the Italian Futurists.

Perhaps the most politically radical of all the avant-garde movements, the Italian Futurists were also arguably the most radical in their verbal-visual experiments. While their disdain for the past runs counter to Morris's philosophy, F. T. Marinetti, leader of the Italian Futurists, and Morris shared an interest in typographical experimentation. Like Morris, Marinetti was a man of means, and he, too, opened his own publishing house, in Milan, where he put into practice the Futurists's fascination with dynamism through the expressive use of typography. Though Marinetti's Fascist politics were damning to the Futurist movement, Cubist interest in their visual experimentation allowed their

¹⁶ Michael Davidson, "The Material Page." *A Book of the Book* ed. Jerome Rothenberg and Steven Clay, (New York City: Granary Books, 2000) 71.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 73.

innovative aesthetics to flourish into the twentieth century. Concrete Poetry and hypertext poetics are both a result of Futurist and Cubist tenets.

Running parallel with and owing much to the French Symbolists and Italian Futurists were the Russian Symbolists and Futurists. The Russian Symbolists, like the French, were rooted in Baudelaire's Aesthetic Movement. They diverged, though, in the early twentieth century with the founding of Acmeism, which stressed the poet as craftsman and the poem as artifact. In this way, Russian avant-garde activity resembles more closely that in England rather than France or Italy. The Russian Futurists favored Cubist techniques and the deconstruction of language that has proven as influential for literary critics as for poets. Nearly simultaneous with the Russian Futurists, Constructivists, whose philosophy linking art and everyday life was a direct result of the Russian Revolution, experimented with materials, form, design, and production techniques linked to political and social reform, similar to Morris's socialist ideals. The Constructivists lacked the funding of the Italian Futurists, but their work on political posters that integrated photomontage and new typography and their experiments in maintaining control over material production, by combining accessible materials with innovative design, have had a lasting impact on book artists.

As important to the history of verbal-visual collaboration was the resurgence of interest in fine printing during the late nineteenth century. Just as he was at the forefront of avant-garde art activity in England, so William Morris was at the forefront of the fine printing revival. Morris's commitment to unity in the arts, to the value of the "lesser" arts, and to design reform led naturally to his interest in book making as an art. Long before he founded his own press, Morris's attraction to Gothic arts laid the groundwork

for his foray into fine printing. Though not a prolific collector of medieval manuscripts, Morris was still drawn to illuminated manuscripts by “his fervently held conviction that such manuscripts represent[ed] the craftsmanship of the Middle Ages at its very highest level.”¹⁸ In the 1860s and early 1870s Morris made unsuccessful attempts to produce illustrated editions of his own books, *The Earthly Paradise* and *Love is Enough*. In the 1870s Morris became an accomplished calligrapher, leading to his later interest in designing his own type. During the 1880s Morris edited the Socialist League’s paper *Commonweal*, which put him directly in the midst of the daily activities of a printing press. Finally, in the late 1880s and early 1890s Morris designed three books for Chiswick Press, which had published his first book of poetry.¹⁹ What fomented his commitment to the book arts was a lecture at the 1888 Arts and Crafts Exhibition. There, Morris heard Emery Walker speak on “Letterpress Printing and Illustrating.” Morris was hooked—he immediately wanted to cut a new font with Walker’s assistance, and though Walker declined to go into partnership with Morris, he was essential to the establishment of Kelmscott Press over the next two years.²⁰

Through Kelmscott Press Morris was able to combine his skills as a designer with his aesthetic philosophy. As early as the 1860s Morris had already developed the philosophy that book illustrations should not be secondary to the book’s text:

At the conclusion of a lecture delivered in 1892, Morris summarized the lesson that he himself had learned, at least partially, in the 1860s: ‘An illustrated book,

¹⁸ Peterson 47.

¹⁹ Ibid. 50-51.

²⁰ Ibid. 74-79.

where the illustrations are more than mere illustrations of the printed text, should be a harmonious work of art. The type, the spacing of the type, the position of pages of print on the paper, should be considered from the artistic point of view. The illustrations should not have a mere accidental connection with the other ornaments of the type, but an essential and artistic connection... This is the only possible way in which you can get beautiful books.²¹

In this pronouncement Morris set apart his goals as a printer of verbal-visual texts from the goals of such publishers as Ambroise Vollard, the Parisian art dealer who first saw the economic value of publishing livres d'artiste.²² While such livres d'artiste can be considered influential as early verbal-visual collaborative models, they cannot be considered true collaborations because the text and images were brought together without the writer and artist working together, as is often done with today's artist's books. With Kelmscott Press, Morris was more influential in modeling verbal-visual collaboration because he worked to integrate text and image and because of his emphasis on book making as an art rather than an economic endeavor. Morris's insistence that control over materials and production—from the paper and ink to font choice and design—remain with the artist, which meant, of course, most often with himself, was essential to Kelmscott's artistic production of books and remains an essential component in the book arts today.

Verbal-visual collaborations would not have been possible without the equal power exerted by avant-garde experiments in expressive typography, visual poetry, and

²¹ Ibid. 53.

²² Peter D. Verheyen, "Development of the Artist's Book," *Book Arts Web*, Philobiblon, April 1998.

collage. Eliot, Pound, Williams, Stevens, and Moore never participated in collaborations with visual artists, but it was their persistent interest in combining the representative techniques of visual art and poetry that opened the door for poets to seek direct contact with visual artists. Developments in fine printing and book design made the production of such contact possible.

At the beginning of the 20th century, these specific influences coincided with the general proliferation of images that was made possible by the invention of photography and that triggered the founding of art galleries, such as Alfred Stieglitz's studio 291 in New York City, which catered to artists and writers. Stieglitz had opened 291 in 1905 under the original name the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, a group of photographers he had formed to challenge the traditional nature of current American photography. 291 was intended to showcase new photography, but Stieglitz soon began to exhibit experimental paintings and sculpture by modern European and American artists, in part because of the success of the ground breaking 1913 Armory Show (the International Exhibition of Modern Art) that introduced modern art to America.

Chief among the modern poets who found in 291 a place to encounter new art and to find support for their own experiments was Marianne Moore, who first visited 291 in 1915. Though, as Linda Leavell makes clear, Moore was not among Stieglitz's inner circle of artists and writers, Moore became a regular visitor to the studio and correspondent with Stieglitz.²³ Moore was attracted to what she described as the greater “evidence of power among painters and sculptors than writers” at that time in the

²³ Linda Leavell, *Marianne Moore and the Visual Arts* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995) 35.

United States.²⁴ It was through Steiglitz and Alfred Kreymborg, editor of *Others*, in which she had published some of her first work, that Moore was introduced to the teeming art world of New York that she continued to find generative throughout her career. William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens²⁵ also sought inspiration at 291, but they were more frequent visitors to the private gallery at the home of Walter and Louise Arensberg, where Marcel Duchamp held court.²⁶ Both Stevens and Williams were drawn to the new artists whose work was being shown in galleries and who made appearances at the Arensbergs's because, like Moore, they saw in the new visual art the innovation that had been missing from poetry in the previous decade.²⁷ Even before his entry into the New York City art world, Williams had been influenced by Ezra Pound, whose own interest in the visual arts played a role in the formation of Imagism and Vorticism. Like Yeats, Pound employed analogies between the visual arts and poetry as a way of explaining both his own poetic practices and his poetic theories.²⁸ Similarly, Williams, Stevens, and Moore translated the techniques of the new visual artists—collage, multiple perspectives, multi-planed surfaces, focus on the image independent of narrative—in their poetry.

²⁴ Ibid. 1.

²⁵ For a more complete treatment of Stevens's relationship to the visual arts see Glen MacLeod's *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art: From the Armory Show to Abstract Expressionism*.

²⁶ Bram Dijkstra, *Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969) 22.

²⁷ Ibid. 5.

²⁸ For a more complete treatment of Pound's relationship to the visual arts see Harriet Zines's *Ezra Pound and the Visual Arts* and Rebecca Beasley's *Ezra Pound and the Visual Culture of Modernism*. For a more complete treatment of Yeats's relationship to the visual arts see Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux's *Yeats and the Visual Arts*.

The fomenting of the pictorial turn has incited what Mitchell calls “a peculiar friction and discomfort across a broad range of intellectual inquiry.”²⁹ For the Modernist poets, the “friction and discomfort” might best be described as an anxiety about the continued power of the word in a culture of the image. Pound, Moore, Williams, and Stevens, in particular, felt the power of the image and saw their words empowered by the visual. Engagement with the visual arts through verbal-visual collaboration, then, serves as a way for poets to confront, challenge, and potentially dispel that anxiety, and that productive engagement sought by the Modernists has only intensified with the work of later writers such as Elizabeth Bishop, W. H. Auden, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, John Ashbery, Frank O’Hara, Adrienne Rich, Ted Hughes, Charles Simic, Robert Creeley, Rita Dove, and C. D. Wright, among dozens of other poets.³⁰

Taxonomy of Verbal-Visual Collaboration

In conjunction with historical influences that have led to verbal-visual collaborations, I also trace the specific history of each of the three collaborations included in this study. In doing so, I hope to uncover the specific practices of collaboration that shape the final product. While my analysis of each collaboration will be based on an integrated reading of the text, I hope to show that an understanding of the work of collaboration can provide insight into how we might approach the resulting imagetexts. Because the process of collaboration itself helps to shape the collaborative imagetext, a vital part of an integrated reading will be an interrogation of how those processes work.

²⁹ Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 13.

³⁰ For more on Elizabeth Bishop and the visual arts, see Peggy Samuels’s *Deep Skin: Elizabeth Bishop and Visual Art*. For more on Sylvia Plath and the visual arts, see Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley’s *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath’s Art of the Visual*.

The working relationship between poet and artist in any collaboration will necessarily be distinctive, but there are ways to categorize that relationship. Using archival research, I provide the beginning of a taxonomy of verbal-visual collaboration based on the working proximity of artist and poet and their relationship to material production. The three verbal-visual collaborations that I have chosen for analysis present three different collaborative relationships, and I have sought to name categories that overtly describe the different relationships represented in my chosen texts:

correspondence collaboration, involving the sequential exchange of materials; integrated collaboration, involving work at the same time on the same material; and partnership collaboration, involving simultaneous work on different material. While these categories are by no means an exhaustive list of possible collaborative relationships, my object is to begin the process of categorizing verbal-visual collaborations, which to date have received no bibliographical consideration, and thereby to identify the elements—such as the interchange between poet and artist and the method of production—by which other categories might be described.

Integrated Reading

By analyzing three different collaborative projects produced in the 20th-century, I seek to illuminate not only the process of verbal-visual collaboration and the different forms it can take, but most importantly to argue for the ways in which these collaborations challenge our modes of reading. Ultimately, verbal-visual collaboration produces imagetexts that demand not parallel reading, reading the poems and art separately, or comparative reading, reading that compares the poems and art, but integrated reading, reading that considers the relationship of the poems and art. Verbal-

visual collaborations involve a complex synthesis of process, production, and reproduction: the circumstances surrounding the inception of the collaboration, the working relationship of the poet and artist, and publication. Producing the collaborative imagetext involves decisions about media and negotiations about the relationship between the poetry and art. Reproducing the collaboration includes the choice of reproduction means, ranging from the single edition, to art house editions, to fine press editions, to commercial press editions; the choice of reproduction process, ranging from letterpress, to gravure, to lithography; the working relationship of the artist and poet with those who carry out the reproduction; and the choices involved in creating the reproduction, encompassing decisions about the design of individual pages, the design of the book as a whole, and reproduction of the book. Because of the intersection of these factors, the resulting imagetext of the verbal-visual collaboration requires an equally complex synthesis of critical approaches. Rather than reading the poetry and the images as separate entities, a reading process that produces two independent readings of a single text, I propose that the imagetexts produced by verbal-visual collaboration be read with attention to the relationship between the verbal and visual elements in order to realize the interpretive richness of the exchange by which the texts are created.

Critical studies of poems that engage visual art, ekphrasis, have tended to discuss that engagement in terms of an antagonistic relationship between poetry and visual art. This relationship was most famously defined in G.E. Lessing's seminal text on the sister arts, *Laocoön*. Lessing argues, "It remains true that succession of time is the province of

the poet just as space is that of the painter.”³¹ He establishes the two provinces of the poet and the artist in order to distinguish between the “domains” of poetry and the plastic arts, to insist that the two arts should not intrude on each other’s domain, and to argue for the primacy of poetry, which, occupying the temporal, has a wider range of expression than visual art. The opposing forces of the image and the word were earlier described by Leonardo da Vinci as *paragone*, a description that implies a kind of battle waged simultaneously by visual artists and writers, primarily poets.³² The “battle” has raged since Homer offered up a description of Achilles’s shield in the *Iliad*.

While many theorists have proposed other ways of articulating how image and word oppose each other, most notably Edmund Burke, John Berger, Ernst Gombrich, Nelson Goodman, and W.J.T. Mitchell, the principle that they are in opposition remains fundamental to the study of word and image. Even William Blake, whose integration of word and image seems to confound the notion of opposition, writes in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, “Time & Space are Real Beings/Time is a Man Space is a Woman.” Here Blake expands Lessing’s parallels of time/poetry and space/art to include gender so that word is aligned with time and man while image is aligned with space and woman. That Lessing, though not necessarily Blake, argues for the primacy of Word/Time/Man over Image/Space/Woman is no surprise.

Contemporary theory and practice has done much to reinforce and sometimes codify the historic privileging of word over image that has enjoyed, and still does enjoy,

³¹ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* trans. Edward Allen McCormick, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) 91. Originally published in 1766, *Laocoön* outlines the distinctions between the “plastic arts” and poetry.

³² W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986). See chapter two, “Image versus Text.”

popular currency. Hence, the pejorative “illustration.” Similarly, critics who have focused their attention on reading ekphrasis apply terminology that suggests opposition even in texts in which poetry and visual art are clearly integrated. Marjorie Perloff asserts that Frank O’Hara’s work with Larry Rivers is a landmark in Modernist collaboration, but her phrasing betrays hesitation concerning the compatibility of the two arts. She writes, “The next step was for poet and painter to work simultaneously on the same spatial area, playing off words against visual images so as to create new forms.”³³ Certainly new forms are created, but must they be created by positioning words *against* images? Drucker argues that words themselves contain the tension of time/space, and calls this tension “an irresolvably dual identity.”³⁴ If such duality is irresolvable in written words themselves, the suggestion is that there exists a fundamental binary operating as meaning (discovered in time) against image (existing in space). Indeed, as W.J.T. Mitchell reminds us, “The history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs, each claiming for itself certain proprietary rights on a ‘nature’ to which only it has access.”³⁵ In *The Art of Interference: Stressed Readings in Verbal and Visual Texts*, Mary Ann Caws proposes “interruption” as a positive term that “works toward openness and struggles against the system as closure, undoing categories.”³⁶ Caws proceeds to argue, indeed, for more open systems of

³³ Perloff 99.

³⁴ Johanna Drucker, *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing, and Visual Poetics* (New York City: Granary Books, 1998) 57.

³⁵ Mitchell, *Iconology*, 43.

³⁶ Mary Ann Caws, *The Art of Interference: Stressed Readings in Verbal and Visual Texts* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989) 6.

reading; however, lingering in the background remains the idea of interruption, as a kind of aggressive insistence on difficulty caused by difference. Despite this, Caws remains one of the most generous of critics reading poetry in relation to the visual art it engages, keeping company with other recent scholarship that argues for a less oppositional relationship between word and image. Chief among those scholars are art critic Mieke Bal, who argues for multiple points of relation between word and image,³⁷ art critic James Elkins, who sees “pictures and writing...as an articulated continuum of signs,”³⁸ rhetoricians Mary E. Hocks and Michelle R. Kendricks, who contend, “the relationships among word and image, verbal texts and visual texts, 'visual culture' and 'print culture' are interpenetrating, dialogic relationships,”³⁹ and literary critic Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, whose work on ekphrasis seeks “to move beyond the appealing drama of *paragone*.”⁴⁰ I will follow their lead by proposing an “open” form of reading that combines processes of seeing, as they relate to images in space, and processes of meaning-making, as they relate to the accrual of words (both written and read) over time—an integrated way of reading.

In “Max Ernst: Passed and Pressing Tensions,” art critic Lucy Lippard says of Max Ernst’s collage novels: “The reader must literally read between the lines provided by

³⁷ Mieke Bal, *Looking In: The Art of Viewing* (Amsterdam: G + B Arts, 2001).

³⁸ James Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words that Fail Them* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 158.

³⁹ Mary E. Hocks and Michelle R. Kendricks, *Eloquent Images: Word and Image in the Age of New Media* (Cumberland, RI: The MIT Press, 2003) 1.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 15.

the verbal-visual interaction and project himself into that intermediary space.’⁴¹ The suggestion is that verbal-visual interaction produces spaces between in which the reader might position herself. I modify and extend that suggestion by arguing that the space created by collaboration is not empty—space between—but is rather a pre-existing empty space filled by the collaborative work. Lippard positions the visual and verbal elements as simultaneous, an important point, but also as unable to be integrated fully, thus producing a text that is unified to a certain degree but not to the point that a reader cannot settle for traditional, if not typical, linear reading. I hope to show that integrated reading opens up new avenues for discovering what imagetexts produced through verbal-visual collaboration reveal about the relationship of image and word.

Verbal-visual collaborations require a great deal from their readers. The demands placed on the reader include negotiating the relationship of the verbal and visual elements while maintaining conscious awareness of the process of reading that relationship as it generates meaning. Integrated reading requires an awareness of the features of a page: the graphic, pictorial, and textual elements of presentation and content.⁴² On the field of the page, no element is insignificant and each element contributes to a text’s possible meanings. As Jerome McGann argues in *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web*, “aesthetic space is organized like quantum space, where the ‘identity’ of the elements making up the space are perceived to shift and change, even reverse themselves,

⁴¹ Lucy Lippard, “Max Ernst: Passed and Pressing Tensions” *Hudson Review* 23 (Winter 1970-71); rpt. *Art Journal* 33 (Fall 1973): 13.

⁴² Johanna Drucker, “Graphical Readings and Visual Aesthetics of Textuality” *Text* 16 (2006): 267-276.

when measures of attention move across discrete quantum levels.”⁴³ Approaching the page as a quantum field allows the reader to seek connections between verbal and visual elements beyond a simple one to one comparison. A reader wishing to integrate the verbal and visual aspects of a page must examine the visual elements of the text and the textual elements of the image as well as the graphic elements that structure both. Such an examination includes typography, white space, graphic marks and lines, headers and footers, column arrangement, color, and the relative spatial positioning of image and text. An integrated reading also poses questions meant to open the verbal and visual elements within this field. A reader should ask what the image has to say and what images words form, both literally and figuratively. Interrogating the nature of the poetry from the stance of the images, and vice versa, necessarily means interrogating the nature of representation itself. Indeed, a central concern of each of the three verbal-visual collaborations included in this study, of verbal-visual collaborations in general, is representation, a fundamental concern that stems from avant-garde experiments with verbal-visual relationships. An integrated reading considers the ways in which issues of representation are interrogated in the process, presentation, and meaning-making of a collaborative imagetext. By examining the page as a “quantum field,” to use Johanna Drucker and Jerome McGann’s phrase,⁴⁴ I will ask how the process of verbal-visual collaboration is represented, how the product is re-presented, and how the elements of representation work together to produce meaning.

⁴³ Jerome McGann, *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001) 183.

⁴⁴ Drucker, “Graphical Readings and Visual Aesthetics of Textuality” 271.

Chapter Descriptions

The first chapter in this study engages the penultimate collaboration between poet Ted Hughes and artist Leonard Baskin. *Capriccio* (1990) presents a correspondence model of collaboration in which the artist and poet collaborated by exchanging work and corresponding by letter. Hughes and Baskin produced the resulting text in a limited edition through Baskin's own Gehenna Press. In this way, Hughes and Baskin announce their work as fine art and indicate the necessity of maintaining control over material production in order to ensure that the integration of word and image privileges neither but, rather, highlights their intersection. I begin my analysis of verbal-visual collaborations with Hughes and Baskin in order to make transparent the historical connection between the tradition of fine press books and the emphasis on material production that serves as a prominent influence of modern interest in verbal-visual collaboration. In this chapter I investigate the improvisational process of collaborators working sequentially, in an exchange during which one or the other could never know what might greet him in the mail. This sequential process highlights the ongoing exchange between word and image. The resulting dialogue exposes mutual moments of anxiety over representing both physical and mental suffering. Those few critics who have engaged *Capriccio* largely disregard Baskin's engravings and read the text as Hughes's homage to Assia Wevill. However, an integrated reading that considers the process of collaboration and treats the verbal and visual elements equally reveals a book that investigates art's ability to represent pain and provokes readers to renegotiate familiar dichotomies.

In the second chapter I turn to *Stones* (1957-1960), a collaboration between poet Frank O'Hara and artist Larry Rivers, which was commissioned by Tatyana Grossman, founder of Universal Limited Art Editions, who wanted "a book that would be a real fusion of poetry and art, a real collaboration, not just drawings to illustrate poems."⁴⁵ *Stones* represents an integrated collaborative model, in which the poet and artist worked together to inscribe twelve lithograph stones. All of the lithographs that resulted from the collaboration, except one, are the result of simultaneity. My analysis of *Stones* allows me to extend my argument in chapter one by interrogating the ways in which the intimate process of collaboration combines with the singularity of the text to produce a material artifact that represents time and space simultaneously. My integrated reading of *Stones* shows that O'Hara and Rivers seek to make matter of their shared personal and aesthetic lives in a specific place, New York City, at a specific time, the late 1950s. The plates themselves appear chaotic, with the hand-written poems and etched images floating on and around each other. The resulting imagetext challenges the practices of representing abstract aesthetic and political ideologies as they interact with the personal relationship between two men, and tasks the reader not with finding order in chaos but with making meaning of chaos. The lithographic stone serves as the site of work and as the work itself, but, because the stone must be inscribed backwards, we cannot read the work itself without great effort. We encounter the work, then, as filtered by the process of creating prints, and, so, an integrated reading of *Stones* must dig through the layers of representation that constitute the text. Ultimately, *Stones* celebrates spontaneity by translating the tenets of Action Painting to the process of book making, while at the same time challenging the heteronormativity present in the 1950s New York art world.

⁴⁵ Perloff 100.

In chapter three I turn to *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* (2004), the most recent work of poet C.D. Wright and photographer Deborah Luster. In this project Wright and Luster wrote about and took photographs of the lives of numerous prisoners in some of the worst prisons in Louisiana. *One Big Self* is a model of partnership collaboration that shows how poet and artist can work alone within a given field while also working together to interconnect their two arts. Unlike in the previous two verbal-visual collaborations, Wright and Luster actually highlight the differences in their media and by doing so emphasize the benefits of placing them in dialogue. An integrated reading of this text yields an understanding of the ethical difficulties encountered when seeking to represent people who have been removed from society's view. The graphic design of the book both reflects and constitutes the collaborative process. The text of the poem visualizes the people pictured in the portraits, and the portraits speak to the experience worded by the poem. The ample white space in which these elements exist creates room for movement, and reinforces the idea of multivalent relationships. *One Big Self* is a book that questions our modes of classification and our methods of acquiring knowledge and works against the impulse to classify—the photographs and poem form a reflexive correspondence within a design scheme that refuses any hegemonic relationship between word and image, placing value, instead, on the search for connections. The final product, the book, is no more important than the process of collaboration itself, and within the book, the process of making and uncovering connections becomes as important, if not more so, than establishing individual identities.

Coda

In my coda I consider the implications of my analysis of the three collaborative models for the critical study of 20th and 21st-century poetry. By offering integrated readings of verbal-visual collaborations, I argue that the opposition into which word and image are usually placed, in the tradition of Lessing, is not an inherent opposition. Further, such a practice of division inhibits our understanding of imagetexts specifically, and poetry generally. The anxiety produced by the pictorial turn need not express itself in critical approaches that seek to minimize the visual but rather can serve to open our critical approaches to new fields of inquiry and processes of reading that integrate word and image rather than placing them in opposition. I argue that applying the principles of integrated reading to poems provides insight into the visual strategies and material concerns of 20th and 21st-century poets. As poets increasingly turn to digital tools for challenging and expanding the expressivity of written language, it is important to foreground their work as informed by the processes and products of their precursors and those concurrent practitioners who take up the challenge within the context of books.

Chapter One

“All of a Piece”: Ted Hughes and Leonard Baskin’s Correspondence Collaboration on *Capriccio*

Introduction: The Book

Published in 1990, *Capriccio*, the penultimate collaboration between poet Ted Hughes and artist Leonard Baskin, recalls both the livres d’artiste of the nineteenth century and the medieval manuscripts on which William Morris based many of his design principles. Like a livre d’artiste, *Capriccio*’s design is fairly simple, featuring text on the left and image on the right, but unlike a livre d’artiste Baskin’s engravings in *Capriccio* were not produced for the sole purpose of illustrating Hughes’s poetry. And though *Capriccio* resembles the medieval manuscript in its handcrafted details and use of fine materials, nothing in the book is ornamental. The basic, perhaps even predictable, layout of text and image minimizes the interruptions that can be caused by graphic elements and maximizes the possibility for metaphoric correspondence as opposed to illustration. Read together, Hughes’s poetry and Baskin’s art meditate on the cycles and rituals that materialize in the body, both physically and mentally, and in relationships among bodies, both human and animal. Hughes ends the opening poem “Capriccios” with a prophecy that looks both backward and forward, setting up not only the major theme but also the mechanism for reading the book as a whole: “You will be laughed at/ For your superstition./ (Even so,/ Remembering it: will make your palms sweat,/ The skin lift blistering, both your lifelines bleed.)”⁴⁶ *Capriccio*, like its title poem, is a book that works to uncover the metaphorical correspondence between mind and body and so works both

⁴⁶ Ted Hughes, “Capriccios,” *Capriccio* (Northampton, MA: Gehenna Press, 1990).

within and against Lessing's traditional dichotomy of language as temporal and intellectual and visual art as spatial and physical. While Baskin and Hughes do not necessarily seek to overturn that tradition, through their collaborative process of making and producing *Capriccio* they insist that the dichotomy between poetry and visual art, like the dichotomy between mind and body, is not natural but manufactured by humans and is ultimately destructive in terms of making art and living life.

Ted Hughes is undoubtedly one of the great poets of the twentieth century. He is also one of its most prolific verbal-visual collaborators. Of approximately 170 total publications (including books of poetry, fiction, essays, drama, and broadsides), 76 of Hughes's publications contain both verbal and visual elements.⁴⁷ While not all of these publications can be considered full collaborations, for reasons I will detail below, they all combine Hughes's words with an artist's image or images and thus point to Hughes's intense interest in working and publishing with artists. Hughes also collaborated with poets, musicians, directors, and printers, but his work with artists constitutes his most

⁴⁷ A complete list would be instructive here since none currently exists: "Pike," *Meet My Folks!*, *How the Whale Became and Other Stories*, *The Earth-owl and Other Moon People*, *Nessie the Mannerless Monster*, "The Burning of the Brothel," "Fern," "Gravestones," "I Said Goodbye to Earth," *Five Autumn Songs for Children's Voices*, *Poems*, *The Iron Man*, "The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar," "A Few Crows," *Crow: from the life and songs of the crow*, *The Coming of the King and Other Plays*, "Fighting for Jerusalem," "This Game of Chess," "Autumn Song," *Eat Crow*, *In the Little Girl's Angel Gaze*, "Sunday," *Prometheus on His Crag*, *The Tiger's Bones and Other Plays for Children*, *Season Songs*, *Cave Birds: An Alchemical Cave Drama*, "The Interrogator," "Chiasmadon," *Gaudete*, *Orts*, *Adam and the Sacred Nine*, *Moon-bells and Other Poems*, *Moortown Elegies*, "Brooktrout," "Pan," "In the Black Chapel," "Wolverine," "Eagle," "Mosquito," "Tapir's Saga," "Sky Furnace," *Moortown*, *Remains of Elmet*, *Elmet*, "The Threshold," *A Primer of Birds*, *Under the North Star*, "The Great Irish Pike," "Fly Inspects," "Mice are funny little creatures," "Weasels at Work," *River*, *What is Truth?*, "The Best Worker in Europe," *Mokomaki*, *Ffangs the Vampire Bat and the Kiss of Truth*, *Flowers and Insects*, *The Cat and the Cuckoo*, *Tales of the Early World*, "Earth Dances," *Capriccio*, *The Volunteers: the Bournemouth Fire Brigade 1870-1929*, *Bournemouth Firemen at War*, *The Post War Bournemouth Fire Brigade 1948-1974*, *The Iron Woman*, *The Iron Wolf*, "Football," *Shakespeare's Ovid*, "Comics," *Shaggy and Spotty*, *Howls and Whispers*, *The Mermaid's Purse*, *Collected Plays for Children*, *The Oresteia*.

sustained collaborative interest, beginning with his second publication “Pike,” a poem printed as a broadside accompanied by a woodcut by artist Robert Birmelin, and ending with the posthumous publication of *The Oresteia*, Hughes’s translation accompanied by woodcuts by artist Leonard Baskin. Tellingly, both “Pike” and *The Oresteia* were published by Gehenna Press, the small fine-press owned and operated by Leonard Baskin, with whom Hughes collaborated on at least twenty different projects (more if one considers those projects that were never published). Hughes clearly valued the process of working creatively with others and was also inspired by mixing various art forms.

Taking into account Hughes’s proclivity for translation (of writers both living and dead) and his critical interest in history, religion, and myth, it becomes apparent that Hughes not only found inspiration in the work of others but also viewed his own craft as a part of a larger whole—a part of a lineage of artists and a part of an ongoing quest for truth, what Hughes calls “it” in the essay “Orghast,” and which he determines involves a combination of influences that work together.⁴⁸ For Hughes this means that artists must seek the influence of other artists in order to find truth. Hughes’s collaborations are not incidental to his work—they are instrumental. Reading his poems with attention to how they were produced and to how they relate to the images that originally accompanied them increases the richness of our insight into those poems and into Hughes’s development as a poet. Only a handful of scholars have studied his collaborations, and as a result our understanding of his achievement and influence is only partial. In this chapter I hope to demonstrate not only that reading Hughes’s verbal-visual collaborations is relevant to understanding his poetry but also that it is a valuable means of analyzing the

⁴⁸ Ted Hughes, “Orghast,” *Winter Pollen* ed. William Scammell (New York: Picador USA, 1994) 125-127.

relationship between words and images as it is negotiated by a poet and an artist who influenced each other over four decades of friendship and whose work is independently recognized as important by artists and critics alike. I have chosen to focus in this chapter on *Capriccio* for several reasons: first, it is a book whose making took nearly fifteen years, which means it comes with a substantial material history; second, because it is the book identified by both Baskin and Hughes as their most collaborative⁴⁹; and third, because it is understudied and, I believe, misread. By attending to the process behind their collaboration and providing an integrated reading of *Capriccio*, I hope to uncover the context in which Hughes wrote and provide an enhanced understanding of his poems.

Though at first glance the book's cover seems to tell us little more than the book's title and its status as finely wrought, it does indeed prepare the careful observer for a text composed of seemingly disparate elements and suggests that what lies within will challenge our notions of unity and difference. *Capriccio* is a book printed in a limited edition of fifty (the first ten of which are deluxe copies that include an original Hughes manuscript and Baskin drawing), containing twenty poems by Hughes and nineteen engravings, six woodcuts, and one wood-engraving by Baskin.⁵⁰ Printed by Gehenna Press, the book is bound in leather and housed in a leather and cloth tray case. *Capriccio* is nearly two feet tall and fifteen inches wide. With its dark green and red leather cover, gold lettering on the spine, and fifty handmade pages, *Capriccio* is no less than grand, perhaps even imposing. The alternating stripes of green, red, and green leather on the

⁴⁹ Leonard Baskin, "Note for *Gypsy and Other Poems: James Baldwin*" *The Gehenna Press: The Work of Fifty Years* ed. Lisa Unger Baskin (Mass.: Oxbow Press, 1992) 107.

⁵⁰ According to a letter from Baskin to Hughes, deluxe copies sold for \$14,000, and regular copies sold for \$9000. Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, December 6, 1990, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

front cover are overlaid with the title, printed in two-inch tall black capital letters near the top. Rough, hand cut edges of paper peep out at the top, bottom, and right side [Figure 1]. Gold lettering runs the length of the red spine, the equally spaced letters announcing, “· CAPRICCIO · TED HUGHES · LEONARD BASKIN ·.” On the back cover, in black, “GP” [Gehenna Press] fits into the middle red stripe. *Capriccio* is handsome and meant to be displayed handsomely, whether shelved or laid on a table. But the materials used to bind the pages together, more than merely elegant, also hint at how the book should be approached. The most telling feature of the cover is the alternating stripes of green and red. These two colors are complementary because they appear directly opposite each other on the color wheel. Contrasting them has the effect of emphasizing each while also highlighting the fact that though the two colors are dramatically different they harmonize. The familiar definition of the title word—an improvisational musical composition—underlines the notion of unity achieved through difference, in the sense that improvisation is often an act of making a whole out of whatever parts are available. Finally, the lack of designation between “author” and “illustrator” on the spine of the book distributes the weight of meaning evenly among names, suggesting that the name of the book and the names of its “authors” are somehow both separable (by naming) and inseparable (by function).

Inside, *Capriccio*'s pages are sturdy but also somehow delicate. The pages fall open easily, and the need to run fingers over the varying textures of each page can be satisfied without fear of damaging the book. At the same time, each page is thin enough to reveal the shadow of what lies before or after it. *Capriccio* is comprised of twenty spreads of text and image, eighteen spreads of text and poem titles, one spread of image



Fig. 1. Front cover of *Capriccio*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

and poem title, blank front and back endpapers, two flyleaves, a frontispiece, a title page, and a colophon, signed by both Baskin and Hughes. Between each page of text and image a tissue guard has been inserted to protect the printed etching or engraving. The images are printed onto various colored papers (some cream, some red, some purple) using copperplates, then cut to size and pasted to the book's pages. The poems are letterpressed directly onto the book's pages using the font Spectrum, designed by the twentieth-century Dutch designer and bookmaker Jan van Krimpen.⁵¹ The pages are not numbered, and the only marks besides titles, poem text, and images, are Baskin's handwritten numbers under each print.

I reserve discussion of the effects of each specific element of the book for my integrated reading, but it is fair to say now that the overall effect is of a book that has been meticulously crafted. The simple design scheme and lack of ornamentation leave the reader free to roam the book unimpeded, while the fine materials and labor-intensive details persuade the reader to linger. *Capriccio* is a book that invites both awe and study, expansiveness and intimacy. It is not possible to read this book in the usual way—seated in an armchair or propped up in bed. In fact, because it was issued as a limited edition, for most readers the only way to read *Capriccio* is to make a foray to a rare books room at a prestigious library and cozy up with bookstands and watchful librarians. This is perhaps not exactly what Hughes and Baskin had in mind, but neither could it have escaped their attention that this collaboration would reach a far more limited audience than the trade editions of their earlier collaborations, *Crow* and *Cave Birds* (in fact, as I will return to later, limiting the audience seems to have been a particular concern of

⁵¹ Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, February 7, 1990, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

Hughes's as indicated in a letter he sent Baskin in August of 1989). *Capriccio* may be understudied for practical reasons—it is difficult to access and challenging to read—but I contend that those very impracticalities are what make it such an important book to study because they force us to keep the act of reading always in mind.

For anyone familiar with Leonard Baskin's work, the attention to detail in *Capriccio* comes as no surprise. As a sculptor, printmaker, and book designer, Baskin, born in New Jersey and raised primarily in Brooklyn, was a prolific artist whose interest in the human form and in art and artists of the past seemed to mark him as out of step with the abstract artists of the 1950s, when Baskin first gained national recognition. In a 1964 article, art historian Alfred Werner defended Baskin's ties to the past, arguing, "While a number of artists of his generation have gone out of their way to be 'original', cost what it may, Baskin has set himself a more difficult task: to be inventive within the conventions established in a four-thousand-year-old tradition."⁵² Baskin's admirers have called him an intellectual, a philosopher, "the literary man's visual artist,"⁵³ and indeed Baskin is an artist whose allusions to religion, literature, myth, and history are as varied and intricate as Ted Hughes's. It is no wonder then, that Baskin and Hughes were drawn to each other when they first met in 1958 at Smith College, where Baskin and Sylvia Plath, Hughes's wife, both taught. The two were so taken with each other's work that they immediately embarked on a project together—a broadside of Hughes's poem "Pike," printed in 1959 by Baskin at Gehenna Press. "Pike" was only Hughes's second publication, while Gehenna Press had been in operation since 1942. Baskin started the press in that year when he was a student at the Yale Art School, where he attended class

⁵² Alfred Werner, "Leonard Baskin: Art for Life's Sake," *American Artist* 28 (1964): 43-44.

⁵³ Douglas Davis, "Art's Poet Laureate," *Newsweek* 29 June 1970: 86.

little, preferring to spend his days reading in the Linonian and Brothers Library. In Baskin's words, "One fair day, I chanced upon the shelves laden with books by & about William Blake. Confronting Blake plain & unexpected was like being struck by a locomotive. Here was model, praxis, paradigm & example, an artist & poet coupled. He made his own strange & marvelous books, their impact was overwhelming & I determined to learn to print."⁵⁴ His first foray into printing was a book of his own poems, *On a Pyre of Withered Roses*, which Baskin set and printed at Yale's Jonathan Edwards College printing press. Baskin calls this book "the true Gehenna Press incunabulum,"⁵⁵ but the press would be dormant for nine years after, while Baskin served in the US Navy and continued his studies as an artist. Gehenna Press's second book was published in 1951 by a commercial printer because Baskin did not have access to a printing press in his new hometown of Worcester, Massachusetts. As Baskin says, "This incursion into Worcester's printing world resulted in the press acquiring its first printing impedimenta," all used and somewhat "battered."⁵⁶ The press remained in Worcester until 1953 when it moved with Baskin, who had received a Guggenheim and was to begin teaching at Smith. Gehenna Press flourished in Northampton, Massachusetts, until 1976, the last two years of which the press was operated by pressman Harold MacGrath in Baskin's absence (he had moved with his wife and children to Devon, England, in 1974, in part to be near Hughes). During the Northampton years, Gehenna Press turned out a wide array of books: books ornamenting and/or illustrating previously published texts by authors

⁵⁴ Leonard Baskin, "Note for *On a Pyre of Withered Roses*," *The Gehenna Press: The Work of Fifty Years* 28.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 29.

⁵⁶ Leonard Baskin, "Note for *A Little Book of Natural History*," *The Gehenna Press: The Work of Fifty Years* 29.

Baskin admired (William Blake, Emily Dickinson, Wilfred Owen, Gustave Flaubert, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Shakespeare, among others); books celebrating artists Baskin admired (Redon, Francesco Laurana, Rembrandt, and Jacob de Gheyn, among others); books of Baskin's woodcuts and engravings (of insects, beasts, grotesques, creatures, flora and fauna); collaborations with artists and writers (most notably several collaborations with poet Anthony Hecht); and books featuring the work of several contemporary writers and artists.

When Baskin moved to England, he thought to give up bookmaking, but in 1981, Baskin converted an old shed at his home in Lurley into a small printing office. The first book published by the newly revived Gehenna Press in England was *A Primer of Birds*, the first collaboration between Baskin and Hughes to be printed by Gehenna. As Baskin notes about the only other Gehenna publication of a work by Hughes, "Pike:" "that publication occurred at the beginning of a relationship that has deepened & ripened, indeed, it was Hughes' presence in Devon that tempted us there. We had collaborated on diverse books, commercial & private press publications, but never one for Gehenna. Proximity [we lived twenty miles from one another] & renewed intensity in our friendship led inevitably to the manuscript of 'A Primer of Birds'."⁵⁷ From then on, almost all of their work together would be printed by Gehenna, including *Capriccio*, which was printed in 1990, several years after Baskin and the press moved back to Massachusetts.

⁵⁷ Leonard Baskin, "Note for *A Primer of Birds*," *The Gehenna Press: The Work of Fifty Years* 95. Brackets Baskin's.

Correspondence Collaboration: The Process

Though they met in 1958, Hughes and Baskin's first sustained collaboration began in the mid 1960s when Baskin asked Hughes to write poems for some prints of crows he had been working on. Baskin has said that he hoped the project would provide Hughes with a reason to turn his creative efforts back to poetry, which he had written little of since the death of Sylvia Plath.⁵⁸ Baskin's instinct was on target. Hughes responded by writing a flurry of crow poems out of which he hoped to write a grand epic. In 1970 Baskin and Hughes published *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow*—Hughes's most read and studied book until *Birthday Letters* was published nearly thirty years later—in a trade addition through Faber and Faber. An expanded trade edition was published in America in 1972 and a limited edition from Faber and Faber followed in 1973. Up to this point Hughes's work with artists had been limited to engaging artists to illustrate his books for children and to working on limited edition broadsides and small books that paired a single poem and image. Fortified perhaps by the critical response to *Crow* but without a doubt by the intimate work of a sustained collaboration, Hughes now embarked on a series of collaborations with Baskin. Until 1974 Baskin had been living in Massachusetts, Hughes in England. Though there were occasional visits between the two, the bulk of their work on *Crow* and their next book, *Season Songs*, as well as the early work on *Cave Birds: An Alchemical Cave Drama*, was managed via letters, with manuscripts, prints, and comments sent back and forth across the ocean. The back and forth nature of this exchange is, I think, evident in the pairing of poems and images that create the sustained, even epic, narratives that evolve in these books. Even after Baskin

⁵⁸ Leonard Scigaj, *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Form and Imagination* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1986) 144.

moved to England in mid-1974 to be closer to Hughes, their work together—most notably *Cave Birds* and *A Primer of Birds*—seems to follow a similar pattern of back and forth correlation, or conversation, between word and image⁵⁹. Most of their collaborations (the publications in which Baskin illustrates text by or translated by Hughes, like *The Oresteia*, are the major exception) can be characterized as either epic narratives, like *Crow* and *Cave Birds*, that build through the associations made between poems and prints, or collections of poems and images, like *Season Songs* and *A Primer of Birds*, that are paired around a central theme. Considering that their own communication was a back and forth exchange and that much of this exchange occurred in letters, these collaborations can be seen as characterized by an exaggerated kind of turn-taking. Hughes and Baskin inevitably settled into a rhythm of conversational exchange, when collaborating on a book, a successive accrual, which is reflected in the relation of poems to images. As Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux asserts in *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, “The *Cave Birds* collaboration contains two conversational exchanges: that of the collaboration itself as words responded to images that responded to words—the narrative itself being filled out and reworked through both poems and images—and that described by the order of words and images as they were finally arranged for publication.”⁶⁰

There is a difference between letter writing correspondence and verbal-visual correspondence. Notions of exchange and narrative generation may apply to both, but the

⁵⁹ Despite living within an hour’s drive of each other, Baskin and Hughes continued to write letters to each other, though with decidedly less frequency than when they lived on different continents.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 149.

philosophical history that informs aesthetic correspondence necessarily shapes the way pairings of word and image are received. For Baskin and Hughes, both of whom were drawn to the ideals of aesthetic correlation practiced by Blake and Baudelaire, I believe that philosophical history also consciously underlies their sense of collaboration. In “Ted Hughes and Romanticism: A Poetry of Desolation and Difference,” Janne Stigen-Drangsholt traces the Romantic ideals exhibited by Hughes’s “meaningful quest” and “metaphoric mode” as they develop in his poetry, and those ideals are also prominent in, perhaps even are a result of, the collaborations. Following the trajectory of Schelling’s theories of symbol and Hegel’s dialectics, Stigen-Drangsholt argues that in Hughes’s poetry, “the fulfillment of one narrative promise is followed by the promise of further myth-making, allowing the quest to move in a dialectic manner, like a spiral based on the presence of the already and the not-yet.”⁶¹ The notion of dialectical movement helps to clarify the nature of conversational correspondence in Hughes and Baskin’s epic narrative collaborations. In this case the pairing of word and image is generative both in terms of propelling the narrative forward and in terms of dramatizing the synthesis of ideas (and in this sense, the pairings can be seen as paralleling the literal synthesis achieved through the back and forth exchange of letters). A brief look at the written correspondence at the inception of *Cave Birds: An Alchemical Cave Drama* and the pairing of words and images in the trade edition (published in 1978 by Faber & Faber and 1979 by Viking) illustrates the point.

On December 8, 1973, Baskin mentioned in a letter to Hughes that, in an effort to ensure work once in Devon, he has floated several book ideas (presumably with Viking,

⁶¹ Janne Stigen-Drangsholt, “Ted Hughes and Romanticism: A Poetry of Desolation and Difference,” *Circles* 12 (2005): 110.

who published a number of his books), including one tentatively titled *A Fantastic Aviary*. He then asks, “Did I suggest we do a bird book? ...I do have a memory trace of our talking about a bird book...”⁶² Perhaps in anticipation of soon living close to Hughes, Baskin declares an enthusiastic idea for a new collaboration: “It wd be incredible if you were to write an epic in the wondrous minutiae of: the heavens in hollow flowers: & if i cd make parrallel [sp?] drawings.”⁶³ In this letter Baskin makes clear that one possible bird book would be a primer book (in the vein of Baskin’s earlier *Hosie’s Alphabet*),⁶⁴ but he seems most excited about the possibility of the more extended collaboration that an epic bird book would entail. Initially, it seems that Baskin hoped Hughes would write an epic set of bird poems, to which he would then provide “parallel” drawings, but in an undated letter most likely written in early 1974⁶⁵ Hughes admits that he has not written any bird songs yet. Not until Baskin and his family moved to Devon did work progress on *Cave Birds*. In the summer of 1974, Baskin showed Hughes nine bird drawings, which inspired Hughes to begin writing his cave drama.⁶⁶ As Loizeaux points out in “Reading Word, Image, and the Body of the Book: Ted Hughes and Leonard Baskin’s *Cave Birds*,” because the first nine poems that Hughes wrote for *Cave Birds* were ekphrastic responses to Baskin’s nine drawings, each titled by Baskin, Hughes may well have shaped the

⁶² Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, December 8, 1973, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA. In all quoted letters the punctuation, spelling, and brackets are Baskin’s, unless otherwise noted.

⁶³ Ibid. Brackets Baskin’s.

⁶⁴ Baskin and Hughes did publish this book, *A Primer of Birds*, in 1981.

⁶⁵ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin [c. early 1974], Leonard Baskin Collection, British Library, London. I tentatively date the letter to early 1974 because Hughes references Baskin’s visit in early 1974 to prepare for his later move to Devon.

⁶⁶ Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts* 144.

initial narrative from those original titles.⁶⁷ In a note sent to Baskin, Hughes makes clear that his narrative does indeed depend on Baskin's drawings. Hughes asks Baskin to do another bird drawing, "of a foolish-noble type of bird, an aspiring phoenix angel-simpleton bird? Necessary for the cast. The others have become a little drama."⁶⁸ As Loizeaux observes, the argument for reintegration that is at the heart of *Cave Birds* is reliant on the interaction of word and image made possible by such precise and insistent pairing.⁶⁹

While *Cave Birds* and *Crow* generate narrative movement forward by pairing specific poems and images, *Capriccio* relies on metaphoric exchange between poems and images to create a meditation. The essence of metaphor is the unannounced correlation between two seemingly unlike things that become so wedded as to be dependent on each other for meaning. Such metaphor does not so much expose similarity as it implies an exchange of different energies. Like the idea of the "meaningful quest," the notion of a "metaphoric mode," suggesting a one-to-one correspondence between two seemingly disparate senses, has its roots in Romanticism, specifically in Schelling and Baudelaire, who popularized Schelling's ideas of synaesthetic correspondence in his poem "Correspondences." According to Baudelaire, "All scents and sounds and colors meet as

⁶⁷ Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, "Reading Word, Image, and the Body of the Book: Ted Hughes and Leonard Baskin's *Cave Birds*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 50.1 (Spring 2004): 26.

⁶⁸ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, July 29, 1974, Leonard Baskin Collection, British Library, London.

⁶⁹ Loizeaux, "Reading Word, Image, and the Body of the Book: Ted Hughes and Leonard Baskin's *Cave Birds*" 44.

one”⁷⁰ so that smells are experienced as sound or colors as touch. Stigen-Drangsholt argues that this metaphoric exchange is an expression of totality and that “truth, in this context, has nothing to do with Platonic ‘agreement,’ but with a certain sense of openness or with letting something be seen.”⁷¹

The pairing of word and image in *Capriccio* is metaphoric, though not in the sense of metaphor as comparison. Rather, I am interested in applying blend theory to the pairings of word and image in *Capriccio*. Traditional theories of metaphor describe similarities as moving from one object to another, while blend theory, originated by Mark Turner and Giles Fauconnier, holds that there are a number of metaphoric correlations that can be mapped by blending attributes from two “input fields,” in this case a poem and an engraving, in order to study relationships. In particular, I will apply Turner and Fauconnier’s theory of identity blends in which both input fields maintain their distinct characteristics so that the focus of study is on the interaction between characteristics.⁷² My premise is that the poems and etchings in *Capriccio* work together to form a blend identity, a third identity where both Hughes and Baskin and the reader contend with questions about the relationship between mind and body, man and the natural world, human life and the life of myth. Like *Crow* and *Cave Birds*, *Capriccio* is a quest—not a narrative quest, but a meditative quest to understand the cyclical origins, ritual manifestations, and painful consequences of the suffering caused by the break down of relationships.

⁷⁰ Charles Baudelaire, “Correspondences,” trans. Richard Wilbur, *Baudelaire in English* ed. Carol Clark and Robert Sykes (New York: Penguin Books, 1997) 19.

⁷¹ Stigen-Drangsholt 110.

⁷² Giles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, “Conceptual Integration Networks,” *Cognitive Science* 22.2 (1998): 133-187.

Capriccio can easily be read as a group of poems written for or about Assia Wevill (the mother of Hughes's third child, Shura)—in fact, the only three scholars to write anything significant about *Capriccio*, Elaine Feinstein, Carol Bere, and Ann Skea, spend the majority of their analyses in defending the validity of reading the text as “Assia poems.” In doing so Feinstein virtually ignores Baskin's engravings while Bere and Skea relegate them to “illustrations.” Such a reading not only privileges the poems over the images but is also blind to the interplay of poems and images that is instantiated by the book's design and confirmed by studying the collaborative process behind the making of the book. *Capriccio* wrestles with a fundamental dilemma—what Hughes called “the struggle to possess [one's] own experience, in other words to regain [one's] genuine self”⁷³ and what Baskin described as man “rediscover[ing] man, harried and brutalized, distended and eviscerated, but noble withal, rich in intention, puissant in creative spur, and enduring in the posture of love”⁷⁴—the dilemma of confronting pain, brutality, even horror, in the effort to recover a sense of the human self. In *Capriccio*, Hughes and Baskin reveal the process of this struggle in the interaction of word and image, in the material realities of the book, and in their own collaborative exchange.

Capriccio is, I believe, not just the culmination of the collaborative relationship of Hughes and Baskin, created as it was near the end of their careers, but also the achievement of their work together. The process of collaboration is similar to that of *Crow* and *Season Songs*—correspondence across the Atlantic—but the increasing intimacy in their letters and their deeper understanding of each other's work results in the creation of a sophisticated metaphoric correspondence between poems and images.

⁷³ Ted Hughes, “Poetry in the Making,” *Winter Pollen* 24.

⁷⁴ Leonard Baskin, “Of Roots and Veins: A Testament,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 214.3 (1964): 68.

Because the gestation of *Capriccio* was much longer (first mention of the project is made in 1976 and the book was published in 1990) than any of their other projects, the content of the collaboration is impacted as much by their long-term friendship as by their specific work on the book. By the late 1980s and after Baskin had moved back to Massachusetts, Baskin and Hughes began writing letters that were more philosophical and intimate in their details. While they do write about the technical aspects of producing *Capriccio*, Hughes especially seemed more interested in considering weightier matters. What is evident in the letters is also evident in *Capriccio*. It is a book that is intimate and open—its correspondences are loose and unguided. The relationship between poem and image is fluid, ebbing and flowing, not necessarily building in a steady back and forth exchange, but revealing a deeper rhythm of alliance.

***Capriccio* In Context: A Four-Decades Long Correspondence**

The sheer volume of letters seems daunting—five large boxes housed at the British Library and seven bulky folders at Emory’s Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library—and, indeed, reading the exchange between Hughes and Baskin, begun in 1958, means plunging into the minutiae and obsessions of two of the great minds of the century. That Hughes’s letter writing is distinguished is a given. The elegance, wit, and inventiveness of Baskin’s writing are a captivating discovery. The letters follow the arc of their lives, the exchange of details on the day-to-day, travels, births, and deaths. Both experienced what we might consider extraordinary life events, but the discourse on those events is always, at center, ordinary in the sense of friends sharing their feelings, struggles, and ideas. The letters reveal a friendship that is unabashed and deeply moving. They also reveal two men who are sometimes brilliant, sometimes struggling, but always

exhilarated by each other. Though their correspondence is punctuated by several gaps, some as long as two years, the increasing level of intimacy and trust between the two is unbroken.

To uncover the history of their work together, it is natural that I rely on their own words. While Hughes and Baskin were both prolific in writing about their own work, and Hughes wrote two essays as introductions to Baskin's work, it is in their letters that we find the meat of their relationship as men and as collaborators. Vital to that relationship are several key factors that become clear only when taking into account the whole of their correspondence: first, that Baskin is almost always the catalyst for their collaborations; second, that Hughes and Baskin share a similarly bleak outlook on man and a staunch belief that art is man's only outlet for truth and hope for redemption; and finally, that both anchor their philosophies on the strength of the image, whether verbal or visual, to speak. The letters that specifically address *Capriccio* broadly illustrate these points—they begin with Baskin urging Hughes to write in response to his prints; they show both struggling with self-criticism; and they underscore Hughes and Baskin's preoccupation with making sense of patterns and symbols. On a smaller but no less important scale, the letters on *Capriccio* provide insight into methods of compromise, the mechanics of putting together a book, and the reactions of each to the other's work.

Before I move on to an analysis of their collaborative process for *Capriccio*, it is instructive to consider that the major aspects of Hughes and Baskin's relationship are latent in the earliest of their correspondence. In 1959, a year after Hughes met Baskin, and shortly after the printing of "Pike," Hughes wrote to Baskin from Boston:

I wanted to ask you, Leonard, but didn't—if I were to ask Harpers, or whoever publishes this collection I have about ready, to ask you to design the jacket, would you accept? This would ensure great sales, of course, apart from the satisfaction it would give us. The title is the Feast of Lupercal, and I think of the design as a small medallion thing—like the wolf in avarice, but without the man and smaller. A sort of wolf hood without lower jaw. Or whatever you'd think of. I wouldn't ask you this, but you once mentioned it.⁷⁵

A week later Baskin answered, “Yes, Teddie, of course, with pleasure, you enjoy my vermin-pole soul more than almost anyone else.”⁷⁶ This first tentative step toward collaboration, initiated by Baskin when he first mentioned the idea to Hughes who was clearly inspired to seek out such an opportunity, reveals much about the relationship that would develop over the next three and a half decades between poet and artist. Most telling, of course, is that from the very beginning of their friendship, both felt drawn to the other's work and to working together. Also evident is the start of a give and take exchange of ideas on specific themes and symbols that would become standard to their collaborations.

In an undated letter sent sometime after this initial exchange, Hughes replied, “Thank you, Leonard, for your willingness to consider doing a design for my book. I'll tell you how it goes. The general drift of the poems is—‘Man as an elaborately perfected

⁷⁵ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, April, 28, 1959, Leonard Baskin Collection, British Library, London.

⁷⁶ Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, May 8, 1959, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

intestine, or upright weasel.”⁷⁷ Later that fall, though, Hughes wrote to Baskin with bad news: “The book jacket design is off, I’m afraid. Faber’s finally decided that their jackets—which are all of a likeness, formal and tory—are familiar on the bookstore counters, and felt they had better not try anything new.”⁷⁸ And after receiving a copy of *Lupercal*, Baskin advised Hughes, “Lupercal arrived, the cover is inoffensive. The printing is not bad & the poems are great.”⁷⁹ That their first attempt at working together was stifled by publishing constraints is yet another important detail, as is Baskin’s lukewarm response to the printing quality of *Lupercal*. Though Hughes and Baskin continued to publish through commercial printing houses, most notably the collaborations *Crow* and *Cave Birds*, the majority of their collaborative work was published through small hand presses like Gehenna Press and Rainbow Press, Hughes’s private press co-owned with his sister Olwyn. It is not only the persistence with which Hughes and Baskin sought to collaborate but also their focus on the making of books and the exchange of ideas that I believe speaks to the importance of their work in uncovering and understanding the material history of verbal-visual collaboration in the twentieth century.

Of equal interest is the emotional and intellectual relationship revealed in the course of Baskin and Hughes’s correspondence. Their letters are filled with the kind of intimate details about their domestic lives that only trusted friends share, a fact that is particularly significant in Hughes’s case given his understandable wariness about

⁷⁷ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, [c. 1959], Leonard Baskin Collection, British Library, London.

⁷⁸ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, [c. September – November 1959], Leonard Baskin Collection, British Library, London. The months are narrowed down to the time Hughes spent at Yaddo, which he discusses in the letter.

⁷⁹ Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, August 25, 1960, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

allowing certain details into the public sphere. The letters exchanged prior to Baskin's move to Devon provide a picture of two men who have found a kindred artistic spirit in each other. In 1965, Hughes wrote to Baskin that he'd finally started writing again after a gap of two years.⁸⁰ Hughes discloses that, "'The Book of the Crow' has developed till it includes everything I'm able to think up," and asks Baskin, "Are you still interested in a brief series of Crow's adventures?"⁸¹ Baskin's response is exuberant:

The great black tenebrous crow caws you greetings of love & regard. He was terrifically happy to learn that you are reasonably well & working again. & that the Anatomy of a Crow was in your head & hand. I have a vision of the cracked swollen belly of a vast crow as spilling forth the grisly rot of time. & in the head the wit, wisdom & fantasy of the time. Great laughing cawing cackling crows, impervious to all, predators of the roadside dead. Paunchy tough strutting fulgent brilliant bastards who along with the rats will inherit the earth. I am eager to see what you have written & promise a great Gehenna book.⁸²

Baskin's excitement about the project is clear, but this passage also shows how Baskin and Hughes exchanged artistic ideals, often in the form of shared symbols and views of the world. A few years later, Hughes described the language he sought for Crow

⁸⁰ This appears to be the first letter Hughes wrote to Baskin after Plath's death. Baskin visited Hughes in England after Plath's death, and it was then that he suggested a crow collaboration in hopes of helping Hughes start writing again.

⁸¹ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, [c. 1965], Leonard Baskin Collection, British Library, London.

⁸² Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, November 10, 1965, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

(“crowtalk”) as being, “as base and crude and plain and ugly a talk as I can devise...”⁸³ In that same letter he provided Baskin with a condensed version of his vision of Crow as a kind of counter-human who nonetheless characterizes the foibles of humanity in his “apocryphal legends.”⁸⁴ Baskin later described how his drawings would interact with Hughes’s poems with, “crows alive & dead fluttering through the pages like the humans they mimic so well.”⁸⁵ Though critics have and will continue to interpret the crow character in various different ways, what seems clear is that Baskin and Hughes shared a vision of their work as illuminating the base yet redemptive nature of man, a vision that continued to preoccupy their art, both individual and collaborative.

Letters exchanged after the Baskins returned to Massachusetts from Devon in 1984 reveal a deepened friendship characterized by a greater professed reliance on each other and a more nuanced understanding of each other’s work. In May of 1984, Hughes wrote to Baskin about *Flowers and Insects*:

The Flowers & Insects is really sitting: the stocks waiting for 2 or 3 more paintings. Did you do any? What do you think, Leonard?

I suggest: A starling (maybe among hawthorn blossoms!)

A Macaw

A Nightjar

A Songthrush

A Sparrow-Hawk

⁸³ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, March 2, 1968, Leonard Baskin Collection, British Library, London.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, December 23, 1969, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

A Wren

The most suitable of these would be the first 3. But any. I'm sure it needs this other ingredient.⁸⁶

Hughes's certainty in this letter is in obvious contrast to earlier letters in which he made more tentative, open-ended requests. Baskin's reply is interesting not only because he doesn't exactly follow Hughes's direction on bird type (he sent an Arctic Tern and Macaw) but also because he requests reassurance from Hughes that the new paintings do indeed "seem to participate in the life of the ones that preceded them."⁸⁷ This exchange shows artists who are intimately familiar with each other's work, are at ease with their relationship as working partners, and rely on each other for ideas and affirmation.

Correspondence Collaboration: From Pen to Press

The first mention of *Capriccio* can be found in a letter from Hughes to Baskin dated April 15, 1976. Amid description of the weather in Devon, Hughes inserted the following: "Have written pieces for Capriccios [sic]-----some more satisfactory than others, but I'll continue to substitute new ones till everything is o.k. and adequate."⁸⁸ It seems clear that Hughes is referring to a project that the two had discussed previously, perhaps during Baskin's visit to Devon of a few years prior. In his response on June 22, 1976, Baskin noted, "I was delighted that 'Capriccios' is occupying you. It will make a

⁸⁶ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, May 6, 1984, Leonard Baskin Collection, British Library, London.

⁸⁷ Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, May 26, 1984, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

⁸⁸ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, April 15, 1976, Leonard Baskin Collection, British Library, London. Brackets mine.

super book”⁸⁹ and again in a letter dated August 26, 1976, Baskin wrote, “I am delighted to hear that ‘Capriccio’ sits in your consciousness. I’m sure it will be a sensational book.”⁹⁰ Aside from establishing the fact that *Capriccio* was in the works long before it was published in 1990, this exchange is also important because it points to a possible origin for the title, at the very least, if not the project itself. Hughes misspelled “Cappriccios”—adding an extra “p”—in his first letter and continued to do so during the course of his correspondence on the book, even once admitting that he’d probably misspelled the title. Baskin’s replies use the plural and singular forms of the word, spelled correctly each time, a familiarity suggesting, perhaps, that the title originated with him. Other circumstantial evidence supports this theory, most notably that in 1965 Baskin had published a book called *Caprices & Grotesques*. The word “caprice” derives from the Italian word “capriccio,” the earliest definition of which was “shivering,” as in the hair standing on end in horror.⁹¹ “Caprice” is usually now defined as a whim, but the connection to “capriccio” can be seen in its full definition according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*—“a sudden sportive or fantastic motion.” Baskin’s pairing of the terms “caprices” and “grotesques” shows he was aware of the connection between the whimsical and fantastical and the darker implication of their derivation. A manuscript of Hughes’s early poems for this project, circa the late 1970s, is titled “Caprichos,”

⁸⁹ Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, June 22, 1976, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

⁹⁰ Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, August 26, 1976, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

⁹¹ Carol Bere, “Complicated with Old Ghost: The Assia Poems,” *Ted Hughes: Alternative Horizons* ed. Joanny Moulin (London: Routledge, 2004) 31.

indicating that he may have also had Goya's famous etchings in mind, which further demonstrates that for Hughes, as for Baskin, whimsy was connected to horror.

This mostly handwritten manuscript, which was not published (though a few revisions of individual poems are included as uncollected poems in the 2003 *Collected Poems*) and which bears almost no immediate resemblance to the poems in *Capriccio*, was apparently given or sent to Baskin because it is included in the British Library's Leonard Baskin Collection donated by Lisa Baskin, Leonard Baskin's wife, in 2003. Lines such as the following from this early manuscript of *Capriccio* show a clear link to Baskin's connection between caprices and grotesques as well as to the original Italian definition of "capriccio": "When it comes down to it/ Hair is afraid"; "He was frightened/ By the dark, which glittered with need/ By the busy searching of everything/ The wind gnawing each scrap// He opened his mouth in disguise/ Devouring everything he could find/ Of his mother, and ran/ Making noises like the fanged"; and "When dawn lifts the eyelid behind the eyelid/ A night knowledge// Sinks to the roots of hair/ To the seed of bone-marrow// A gravity pulls down the dark knowledge/ A black hole gravity// A swallowing galaxy absence/ Pulls against the ridges of hair// The faint peaks of blood/ Pulls the smile sad."⁹² Though the language of the poems in the manuscript does not find its way into the final poems for *Capriccio*, the early thematic focus on physical responses to fear remains central to the later poems.

Between late 1976, when the Baskins moved to Lurley Manor, near Hughes's home in Court Green, and 1984, when the Baskins returned to Massachusetts, Hughes and Baskin's correspondence was limited to short notes. During this time, Hughes and Baskin worked on a number of projects, including *Cave Birds*, *A Primer of Birds*, and

⁹² Ted Hughes, "Caprichos" [c. late 1970s], Leonard Baskin Collection, British Library, London.

Flowers and Insects, but it is apparent from a letter sent from Baskin to Hughes in 1986 that *Capriccio* had not been forgotten. The fact that Baskin had Hughes's early manuscript in his possession indicates that, originally, the plan may have been for Baskin to create images based on Hughes's poems. However, in his October 12th letter, Baskin noted that, "A small clutch of 'Capriccio' prints will be on their way to you presently. I hope Ted likes and responds poetically to them."⁹³ It is not clear from this letter whether Hughes and Baskin were intentionally entering into a new stage of the project, an ekphrastic one similar to the first two stages of *Cave Birds*, as described by Loizeaux in *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, in which Hughes's poems respond to Baskin's images,⁹⁴ but as both the poems themselves and later letters confirm, Hughes did in fact begin anew the process of writing poems for *Capriccio* after receiving prints from Baskin. As stated earlier, though, while the writing is different from the early manuscript, the thematic concerns suggested by the title remain the same, indicating that the first prints Baskin sent for 'Capriccio' may have been, at least loosely, a response to the original manuscript. Baskin commented in a letter to Hughes in 1984: "As usual I have that profound feeling that we can inevitably inform, reinforce, elaborate, enlarge, each other's work. I do not feel that way about any other writer or artist."⁹⁵ His sentiment is made evident in the collaborative process that created *Capriccio*. Hughes and Baskin not only exchanged work but also ideas, which find their fruition in the interaction of poems and engravings in the book.

⁹³ Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, October 12, 1986, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

⁹⁴ Loizeaux, *Twentieth Century Poetry and the Visual Arts* 144-145.

⁹⁵ Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, September 26, 1984, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

The exchange of ideas was a vital part of their collaborative process, as is evident in the several letters Baskin sent Hughes in 1986 inquiring about *Capriccio*. On December 28, Baskin wrote,

How did you like that group of prints I sent? I hope to do about twenty or so grotesques, diableries, arabesques, etc forming ‘Capriccio’ and I hope the prints will turn you on to write an equally grotesque, diabolic, capricious poem to each. I intend a very small edition and we can sort out emoluments and see the possibility a year or two later of a popular edition of ‘Capriccio’ or embedded into another book of your poems. I am very keen to make ‘Capriccio’: a very great book and have been very busy on a woodcut of a beaked demon. And have many other notions and ideas. I hope all of this exhilarates, invigorates and inspires you: please write!!⁹⁶

In 1987, Baskin again sought to elicit a response from Hughes, jotting on a postcard addressed to “Carol and Ted”: “Is Ted writing? More Capriccios will be winging soon. When do you plan to visit us.”⁹⁷ Hughes was embroiled in a lawsuit and busy with his duties as Poet Laureate, and though Baskin was able to visit Hughes for a day in 1988, Hughes seems not to have responded to Baskin’s queries about *Capriccio* until 1989. Hughes’s letter of March 1 opens, “Don’t be grieved. It’s months since I wrote to my brother, Nicholas. But Capriccios is writhing in its crucible—are writhing in their crucible. (I’m writhing).” He goes on to explain why he hasn’t sent any poems:

⁹⁶ Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, December 28, 1986, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

⁹⁷ Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, March 14, 1987, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

I don't know what happened—age maybe—but I have become infinitely more demanding and particular—I became conscious that I was sliding over the top of what I needed to be meeting head on. I can't go on like that. So things are slower. Something new to be opened up, and I'd prefer to stop right here than go round it or over it. So please be patient, Leonard. Things are coming along. I want a book that pleases me as much as it pleases you. So I'm hoping to have them tuned on the airstrip by June. Also, there's no doubt—things are slower. It's easy to go fast on what I can do easily—I no longer want to do that, I don't want those things. I love the drawings—beautiful. I've been grinding away steadily for a few weeks—seems to me I'm making headway. Getting warmed up. Recuperating.⁹⁸

Hughes's letter confirms that he is engaged in ekphrasis by writing poems in response to Baskin's prints, but it also indicates that Hughes is attempting a new kind of response. Baskin replied eagerly on March 9:

The brain, if allowed, concocts towering structures of imagined hurt and anger: why is Ted angry with me? What dreadful thing have I done? An afterlife brain [like mine] can conjure-up an incredible variety of afflictions: so thank you for your reassuring letter assuaging my hallucinatory wonderings. It was not impatience [June is fine,] it was that I began to feel that those prints were falling off into a nameless void. I am relieved that you like them and a great book will ensue: to please both of us! You know I always marvel at the mutuality of our resonances, well, the chief salutary effect of my pituitary operation was that I emerged from it with a new-found self-critical quality that has been crucial to me

⁹⁸ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, March 1, 1989; Leonard Baskin Collection, British Library, London.

in my on-going work. The greatest danger to middle and later aged artists and writers is that they begin to believe in the kudos, acclamations, celebrations, odes, panegyrics etc that begin to bedeck them, and to subscribe to the inevitability of their genius and greatness, turning everything they touch into instant purest art. Hogwash. Your declaration of not wanting that meritriciousness is wonderfully reassuring and comes at the inevitably right moment. I shan't grieve and don't you fret!⁹⁹

After this breaking of the silence, the exchange of letters on *Capriccio* became more frequent. From May to August, Hughes and Baskin wrote and talked about the evolving state of the poems—Baskin telling Hughes not to “keep the poems of even length for my [i.e. book's] sake”¹⁰⁰; Hughes telling Baskin there are “no great laws” for the order of the poems¹⁰¹; Baskin stating, in a somewhat alarmed tone, “Hosie [Baskin's son] tells me that you are reworking the poems??? I plan to visit London when you are not away or fishing, so we can meet and you can hand me the poems, please.”¹⁰² Finally, on August 21, 1989, Hughes sent Baskin seventeen poems, and a month later he sent three new poems along with revisions of the first seventeen. In that same letter, dated October 14, Hughes wrote, “When you've sorted out the order, provisionally to your satisfaction, could you let me see it? I would like to make sure there aren't any enfeebling

⁹⁹ Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, March 9, 1989, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA. Brackets Baskin's.

¹⁰⁰ Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, May 23, 1989, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA. Brackets Baskin's.

¹⁰¹ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, October 14, 1989, Lisa Baskin, personal collection.

¹⁰² Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, July 9, 1989, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA. Brackets mine.

juxtapositions (of the text)—mainly a matter of unusual words or key images. Far apart they work; close together, they short-circuit. Unless it’s intended, or very good luck.”¹⁰³ Baskin must have found this request a bit confusing because he immediately wrote back to Hughes: “I would massively appreciate, as soon as possible; a) your preferred order of the poems and b) your match-ups of poem and image, even if the images were not central in your writing: at least it strikes me thus: but, if the images sparked an idea, then please, associate the two, any pairing will help.”¹⁰⁴ Back in 1986 Baskin had suggested that Hughes might want to write poems to pair with his “Capriccio” prints, so when Hughes sent him the full set of twenty poems and asked Baskin to decide the order, Baskin may have seen the request as speaking to the lack of definite correlation between poems and prints that they had followed in previous collaborations. As he wrote in the same letter, “The set [of twenty poems] is far deeper, broader, grander than I expected and it is no easy task to fit your dense humanized compactions with my whimsies, however fantastical.”¹⁰⁵ Hughes wrote back immediately to affirm the connection between Baskin’s work and his own: “I’ve been looking at the drawings again, which seem to me all marvelous, with several wonders, and I’m quite sure it was the association I make with what such drawings mean to you—I mean my idea of the origin of those drawings in you, those particular emblems + themes—that focused me on the theme of my verses. So to my mind, the combination is all of a piece at a deep level, (as far as I’m concerned) though I can see that, for you, my verses might seem like an arbitrary choice of guest for

¹⁰³ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, October 14, 1989, Lisa Baskin, personal collection.

¹⁰⁴ Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, October 23, 1989, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. Brackets mine.

that chamber.”¹⁰⁶ Hughes’s words confirm outright what the reader senses when open to the interplay of poems and images in *Capriccio*—that the two draw meaning from each other and, to use Baskin’s word, “enlarge” each other beyond illustration or ekphrastic response. Hughes did finally send Baskin, in an undated letter, a list of an order for the poems, but he still felt it would be best for Baskin to match the poems with the prints. As he said, “I’m leaving it to you to match up the graphics. Which leaves you free, me boy, to make a curious counterpoint.”¹⁰⁷

And a curious counterpoint *Capriccio* does seem when first read. The poems are indeed dense, full of references to numerous mythological and religious traditions, with a speaker (or speakers) who seems to shift perspective without warning, and with a ‘you’ who also seems to shift referent from poem to poem and sometimes even within a poem. The prints are equally dense and varied, picturing birds, grotesque men, fantastical beasts, demonic masks, and their own “curious counterpoints,” like neon pineapples poised around a skull. In my integrated reading of the book, I will show that the “deep level” of the collaboration between Hughes and Baskin is reflected in the metaphoric correspondences between poems and images and that an understanding of the work of the collaboration is crucial to achieving an understanding of the book as a whole.

From the very beginning *Capriccio* defies linear narration. Just as the written correspondence between Hughes and Baskin on the book is focused primarily on an exchange of ideas about “emblems + themes,” so too is the integration of word and image in the book focused primarily on an exchange of energies. Word and image not only

¹⁰⁶ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, October 21, 1989, Lisa Baskin, personal collection.

¹⁰⁷ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, [c. late October/early November, 1989], Lisa Baskin, personal collection. I date the letter to late October or early November of 1989 because it is a response to Baskin’s letter of October 23, 1989.

meditate on each other (as is evident in Baskin and Hughes's literal exchange of materials—Baskin working with Hughes's original manuscript to create images and Hughes working with Baskin's images to write new poems) but also blend to create a single meditation on the connections between past and present, which can most literally be seen in the use of thin paper that allows words pressed onto the front of one page to linger on the next, and mind and body, whose differences are made visible in the pairing of word and image but are also unified in the reliance of word on image and image on word to sustain the book's meditation. The exchange of energies and focus on meditation are anchored in the search for unity in difference, described earlier as beginning with the book's cover. Symbols, patterns, and mythic ritual form the basis of the unifying principle of the book. The same symbols, patterns, and myths serve as images in both the poems and the etchings, and throughout the book a metaphoric correspondence between word and image is created by a shared meditative quest. The central images of ritualized mental pain, which manifests as physical pain, violent disembodiment, and grotesqueries, are embedded in both poems and engravings and gather full force in the blend of the two.

Alone, the poems may well offer a titillating glimpse into Hughes's relationship with Assia Wevill, but paired with Baskin's engravings, the poems gain wider resonance. By publishing this set of poems as a part of a limited edition collaboration, Hughes suggests that the poems have a purposefully limited audience; that they are the product of exchange; and that they are not meant to be read alone. In a letter to Baskin dated August 21, 1989, Hughes makes clear that he does not want the poems in *Capriccio* to be read as biography, reiterating his chief concern that his children be protected from the rumors about his life. He asks Baskin, "Don't tell anybody what I told you about the background

of my pieces, who or what etc. You'd have liked them better if I hadn't told you."¹⁰⁸ In the same letter he also specifically states that he does not want *Capriccio* published in a trade edition. And in a letter to Jutta and Wolfgang Kaussen, who were putting together a group of his poems for translation into German, Hughes makes clear that in the poem "Shibboleth," the fourteenth poem in *Capriccio*, he is writing not about a specific woman but a specific kind of woman who he describes as "an exotic and by fashionable standards very beautiful foreigner."¹⁰⁹ Of course, a poet's desire to have his poems read a certain way should not necessarily limit our reading of his poems, but in this case, paying attention to Hughes's decision to limit the audience of *Capriccio*, and thus limit the number of readers seeking to find biography in the poems (Hughes would partially satisfy this audience with the later publication of *Birthday Letters*), ultimately provides for a broader range of interpretations because it insists that we look for possibilities beyond biography. The limited edition book is a much more private space than the trade edition; even though some of the fifty copies of *Capriccio* were bought by libraries, most were purchased by collectors, friends, and family, effectively ensuring the relative privacy of exchange between words and images in the book. Though not as complete as the privacy created by the exchange of letters (and Hughes did consciously make his letters less private by selling many to Emory University), the limited edition can be seen as a liberating space in which Hughes could use biographical details without adding to what he saw as a feeding frenzy for information about his life. This liberty, he asserted, allowed him to uncover possibilities he had kept locked away for years: "Now I'd like to

¹⁰⁸ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, August 21, 1989, Lisa Baskin, personal collection.

¹⁰⁹ Ted Hughes, *The Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007) 696.

go on from these Cappricciis—which begin to show me a way into the whole mass of things behind Corvus.”¹¹⁰

Baskin and Hughes both clearly valued the intellect and friendship of the other, Baskin writing, “It is always enriching, exciting, stimulating, provoking, endearing, enlarging, joyful, inspiriting & inspiring when we see each other alone as we did last night. What a pity we can’t just exclude everyone else!”¹¹¹ Hughes also valued the time he spent with Baskin: “It was so good to see you Leonard, and to meet you Lisa—it stirred me up so much. I’d been very apprehensive. But now it seems all sorts of possibilities have been made actual, and the only bad thing is that it’s so far between us in water + airports.”¹¹² Their letters also make clear that Hughes and Baskin found inspiration in sharing their ideas and a similar aesthetic philosophy. In 1982 Baskin wrote a three-page letter to Hughes in which he described his summer’s work:

I seem to have an almost endless capacity to make works depicting grief, vast & numbing sorrow, despair & death, dolorous & terrible suffering, etc. I don’t believe that this is a natural inclination, i am not by birth a death-watch beetle, but i rather behave as though i were, this is not to say that i am entirely wanting in those dulcet gifts of decoration & happy colours, but invariably i work, the foul sonorities of miasma & the dark edge of doom are made manifest... Artists in our

¹¹⁰ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, August 21, 1989, Lisa Baskin, personal collection. “Corvus” is Latin for “crow,” and Hughes uses the word frequently in his letters.

¹¹¹ Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, January 17, 1981, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

¹¹² Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, April 20, 1971, Leonard Baskin Collection, British Library, London.

time are almost entirely indifferent to the human condition, which entirely preoccupies me.¹¹³

In 1984 Hughes wrote a letter to Baskin in which he similarly reflects on his own work:

Do you know much about the research into the body's physical response to stress—emotional etc stress? It's extremely interesting. It involves, very heavily, the pituitary. The general drift of the mobilisations are towards defense. This appears in the psychological conscious wavebands, as strategies for not feeling the real pain...Almost all art is an attempt by somebody unusually badly hit (but almost everybody is badly hit), who is also unusually ill-equipped to defend themselves internally against the wound, to improvise some sort of modus vivendi with their internal haemophilia etc. In other words, all art is trying to become an anaesthetic and at the same time a healing session drawing up the magical healing electrics...It is interesting to see—I can see it very clearly it seems to me in what I do—the anaesthetic tendencies, which displace the real confrontation that can only be solved by a real healing...I've been thinking about this in particular because it struck me lately with a certain waking surprise, that I've lived quite a lot of my last ten years (at least) somehow unconscious.¹¹⁴

Baskin and Hughes shared a preoccupation with seeking to understand the human condition, which they saw inevitably as an accumulation of suffering. At an even more fundamental level they shared a belief in the image as the primary means of

¹¹³ Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, September 11, 1982, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

¹¹⁴ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, May 6, 1984, Leonard Baskin Collection, British Library, London.

understanding the human condition. Their letters are laden with rich verbal images and with small drawings, sometimes on the margins and sometimes in the middle of sentences or words. In their published writing about their craft, both Hughes and Baskin assert the primacy of the image. In “Poetry in the Making,” Hughes recounts his childhood love for drawing animals, which allowed him a way of possessing them that he later perfected in his poetry. He remembers “very vividly the excitement with which I used to sit staring at my drawings, and it is a similar thing I feel nowadays with poems.”¹¹⁵ Even when not directly addressing his own poetry, Hughes argues for the value of the image. In “The Interpretation of Parables” Hughes writes, “the most important feature is that the image speaks for itself. Any dressing of explanation or interpretation simply short-circuits out that ‘language of the mind,’ and the story loses its power to affect behavior.”¹¹⁶ And in his essay “The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly,” written in 1984 as the introduction to *The Collected Prints of Leonard Baskin*, Hughes reveals that he is drawn to Baskin’s art because Baskin, too, believes in the primacy of the image. He points out that Baskin’s style “springs from Hebrew script itself” and that “the typical lonely isolation of his figures both sharpens our sense of them as hieroglyphs, cryptograms, and intensifies that atmosphere of Cabala, where each image is striving to become a syllable of the world as a talismanic Word.”¹¹⁷ Later in the essay he argues, “We can look into this task [understanding the evolution of Baskin’s art] more narrowly, perhaps more deeply, and can come maybe to some sense of the biological weight of necessity behind it, if we think

¹¹⁵ Ted Hughes, “Poetry in the Making” 11.

¹¹⁶ Ted Hughes, “The Interpretation of Parables,” *Times Educational Supplement* 20 March 1992: 22.

¹¹⁷ Ted Hughes, “The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly,” *Winter Pollen* 86.

of his graphic line as an image in itself—his fundamental image.”¹¹⁸ Baskin himself argued passionately for the primacy of the image. In “The Necessity for the Image” he makes clear his disdain for wholly abstract art, claiming that the devaluing of man in the modern world has led to the devaluing of the image as necessary to art: “But just as such gesturing and posturing would have been a sham if they were not buttressed with and built on a structure of total formal mastery, so too would the formal mastery alone be hollow and without substance. If you grant me this—and I fail to see how you cannot—then the necessity for the image is manifest.”¹¹⁹

Reading *Capriccio*: “All of a piece”

The poems and engravings in *Capriccio* question the relationships between mind and body, man and the natural world, human life and the life of myth, in a meditative quest to understand the cyclical origins, ritual manifestations, and painful consequences of the suffering caused by the break down of relationships. The meditation begins with a challenge to the reader to enter a dark space most of us would rather not consider. A demon presides over the title page—red-skinned, with blue flame hair, its knotty, razor-nailed hands rest almost gently, possessively, on the title frame [Figure 2]. The demon bares its teeth but does not seem so much threatening as penetrating. The small, circular eyes communicate the demon’s intent to take possession. The reader is stared down, dared to turn the page, promised both malevolence and mystery. Turning the page, we find an almost wholly empty spread, with the single word “Capriccios” printed across the top right. Beneath that word is visible the ghost-print of the poem pressed onto the

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 95. Brackets mine.

¹¹⁹ Leonard Baskin, “The Necessity for the Image,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 207.4 (1961): 76.

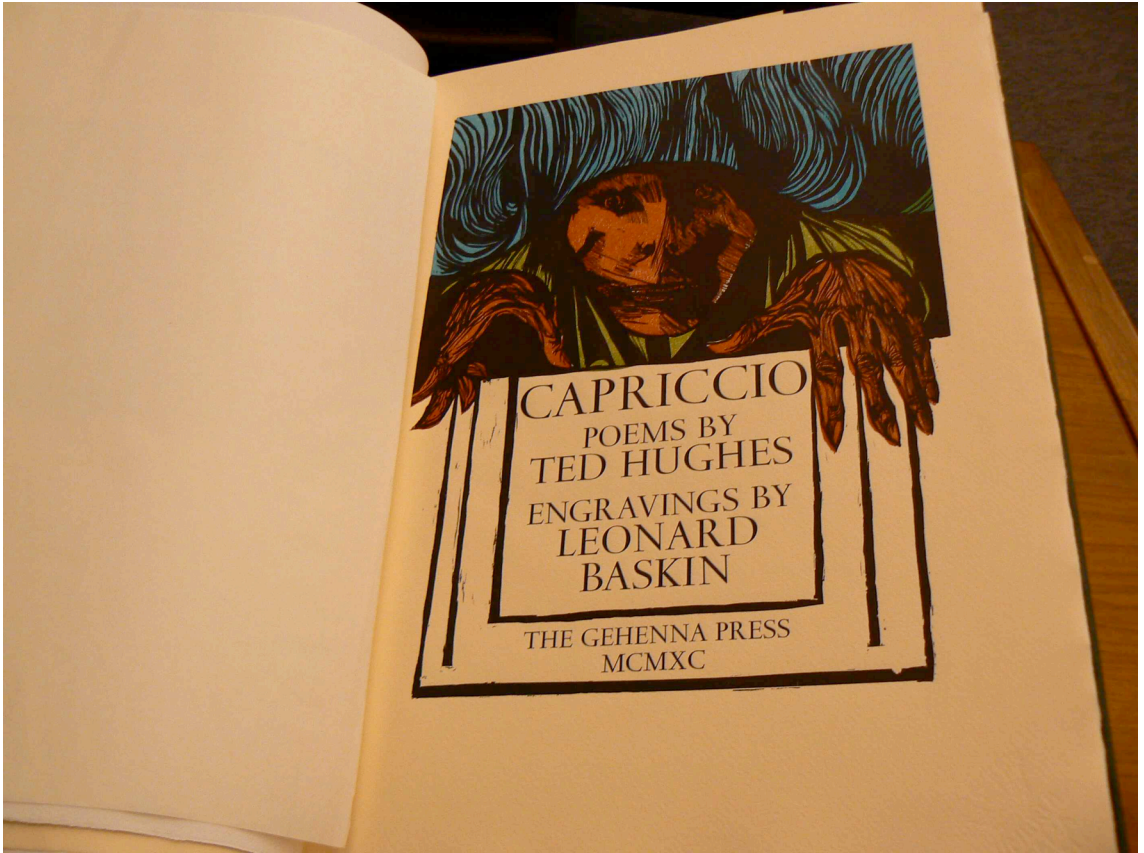


Fig. 2. Title page of *Capriccio*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

opposite page, not quite readable but firmly there. The title page, with its demonic omen, and the following spread, with its phantom text, set a haunted tone for the book. Though the potential horror implied by the title is not overt, it waits just under the surface.

The poem/engraving pairs in *Capriccio* can be roughly grouped into three basic categories—mythical (“Capriccios,” “The Mythographers,” “Systole Diastole,” “Possession,” “The Pit and the Stones,” “Chlorophyl”), historical (“Descent,” “Smell of Burning,” “Shibboleth,” “Familiar”), and personal (“The Locket,” “Folktale,” “Fanaticism,” “Snow,” “Rules of the Game,” “The Coat,” “The Roof,” “The Error,” “Opus 131,” “Flame”)—though the three are not always wholly distinct or easily distinguished and the poem/engraving pairs in all three categories deal with representing the mental pain that is manifested in physical horror. The opening poem/engraving pair, “Capriccios,” discussed below, sets out the urgency of understanding and coming to terms with that horror. In the poem/engraving pairs that follow Hughes and Baskin explore the ways in which mental pain has been forced to channel into physical pain, a process that delays or even derails healing as surely as the division of male and female has resulted in tragedy for humanity.

In *Capriccio* fate and free will, text and image, birth and death, are all exposed as arbitrary delineations. In another introduction to Baskin’s woodcuts and wood-engravings, Hughes writes, “So these engravings, in their endless variety, are the self-portraits of the Angel of Life in its wholeness: men, beasts, birds, insects, plants and supernatural beings, each in the terrible immobility of being forced and fated to move at once in two opposite directions, for the Angel of Life is also, in spite of itself, to its own

horror, the Angel of Death.”¹²⁰ For both Baskin and Hughes, it is this struggle, this movement in opposite directions at once, which art must lay bare.

At the same time that Hughes was working on the poems for *Capriccio* he was also working on his critical book *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* in which he argues that Shakespeare’s “tragic equation” involves the repeated reworking of the formative myth of the Great Goddess whose dual existence—as both goddess of love and goddess of the underworld—underlies all of Shakespeare’s tragedies.¹²¹ A similar obsession with understanding how the relegation of woman in the western world to a dual, contradictory, and seemingly irresolvable role impacts the human condition underlies Hughes’s poems in *Capriccio*. Hughes sees a parallel between the mythic necessity to both revere and kill the female and western civilization’s insistence on the feminine being subsumed, and thus eradicated, by the masculine.¹²² The dichotomy of male and female, and the repeated eradication of the female in myths (implied in her demotion to the underworld), literature, and society, are, according to Hughes, at the heart of all dichotomies, including the separation of word and image and mind and body. To become whole, or healed, one must, at the very least, become aware of the destructive force of dichotomies, and it is this desire to become whole that Hughes returns to again and again in his poetry and especially in his collaborations.

¹²⁰ Ted Hughes, “Introduction,” *Leonard Baskin: Woodcuts and Wood-engravings* (London: RWS Galleries, 1962) 1-2.

¹²¹ Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992) 6-15.

¹²² For more on Hughes’s interest in the figure of the goddess, see Lucas Myers’s memoir *Crow Steered Bergs Appeared* in which he discusses his, Daniel Huws, and Hughes’s interest in Robert Graves book *The White Goddess*.

In May of 1991, a year after *Capriccio* was published, Hughes wrote to Baskin about putting together *Winter Pollen*, a collection of Hughes's prose. He confesses that his best ideas are all in "The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly" and also that the "prose is necessary, I think, because without it, people don't know (as I've discovered) how to read my poems—the prose gives a context (of whatever sort) + helps them with my code."¹²³ Baskin responded by asserting that Hughes's critical prose is important, "But could one suppose that you T.H. crawl deepest into Shakesp. when you write your verse. Not explicating but participating, not delving but adding, not uncovering but heaping the poetic dirt higher & higher. You & your work are the crucial fulfillment of what Shaspr portended. He lives again in yr poetry."¹²⁴ In Baskin, Hughes found an artist who not only understood his work but also worked with a similar motivation. "The real subject" of Baskin's art, Hughes believed, "is the healing of the wound."¹²⁵ And just as Hughes sought a reunification of body and mind, female and male, in his poetry, so did Baskin in his woodcuts and engravings. As Hughes explains, "The blade and the wound: simultaneously male and female. It is a common mythological and folklore motif that the wound, if it is to be healed, needs laid in it the blade that made it."¹²⁶ To find reunification Hughes needed to pair his words with Baskin's images in order to lay bare the dichotomy, to show it as false, and to heal the damage done by its codification.

¹²³ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, May 20, 1991, Leonard Baskin Collection, British Library, London.

¹²⁴ Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, May 25, 1991, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

¹²⁵ Hughes, "The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly" 95.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

Both the poems and the engravings in *Capriccio* combine familiar mythic symbols and obviously personal and impenetrable symbols. The personal and the mythic are fused without overt demarcation or explanation, arguing for their inseparability and by extension the inseparability of mind and body, word and image. Hughes's ambiguous use of "you" as addressee in most of the poems calls attention to the simultaneously personal and impersonal nature of symbols since "you" can be read as referring specifically to Assia Wevill, Sylvia Plath, or Hughes himself, or as referring to the traditional impersonal "you" of lyric poems. Rather than being organized as a narrative sequence focused on reliving the inevitability and finality of Assia Wevill's death, as Carol Bere reads the poems in *Capriccio*,¹²⁷ when read as a part of a larger whole including Baskin's images, the poems defy narrative sequencing, insisting instead on a metaphorical correspondence between difference that is manifested in the fundamental human pursuit—to confront, understand, and overcome pain—played out over and over in our stories, in our history, in our religions, and in our day to day relationships. By literally binding together their words and images in book form, Hughes and Baskin argue that they are united in trying to uncover how the struggles of mind/body, myth/history, personal life/life cycles relate to each other. This process, according to Baskin and Hughes, requires the yoking together of difference in its original form—word (male) and image (female).

In "The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly," Hughes writes, "Leonard Baskin's graphic images seem particularly lens-like. The typically rounded glass-blob outline, and the internal lattice of refracted, converging intensities, which lie there on the paper as

¹²⁷ Bere 32.

superbly achieved solidity of form and texture, in fact compose a web—a transparency, something to be looked through. The depths are focused right there at the surface—which directs our attention straight into the depths.”¹²⁸ Hughes might easily be describing the print that faces the opening of the first poem of *Capriccio*. Just as the first poem, “Capriccios,” can be called a cipher, so does this print of a crow straining at the bounds of the “rounded glass-blob outline” that contains him, serve as an embodied symbol of the human drama that will unfold in *Capriccio*. Originally titled “Superstitions,” the poem that opens the sequence is built around the conceit of bad luck that is brought on by ignoring omens. At the center stands Frigga, Norse goddess of love, marriage, and birth, as well as the weaver of man’s fate and goddess of death. The poem opens, “Friday created Adam. Cast out Adam./ Buried Adam. Friday. Today. Friday// The thirteenth: drunken laughter of the festive gods/ So lightly reversed by Loki’s gift:/ Spermy mistletoe and a ship of tinder.” In these first two stanzas, Hughes connects the very birth of mankind to bad luck. By compressing the birth, life, and death of Adam into two lines and linking each event to Friday, Frigga’s day, Hughes stages life as a fated sequence born of love yet marred by death. The enjambed end of the first stanza links this fated cycle to the unlucky number thirteen and to the easy, yet foreseeable reversal of fortune. The goddess Frigga was able to see the future but was powerless to change what was fated. Loki, Norse god of mischief, fulfills Frigga’s dream of the death of her son by means of trickery. Loki’s gift of a mistletoe dart that ensures the death of Baldr is both the fulfillment of a prophecy and the symbol of a reversal of fortune. It is, as the word “spermy” suggests, procreative. That is, the weapon of fate creates the future, which is, at the same time, created by fate. In the next two stanzas, Hughes presents two other

¹²⁸ Hughes, “The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly” 84.

familiar fables that follow the same pattern of bitter fulfillment of fate—the crucifixion and Columbus’s discovery of America, both of which take place on Friday the Thirteenth. In the next stanza, Hughes suggests that Friday the Thirteenth, like Loki, is a symbol of trickery, to which we are all subject. We are fated yet choose to forget that, or rather need to forget that in order to live. The signs are there in the following stanzas, in the cauldron and bride’s mirror, which both have the potential to reveal the future but that we willingly forget to heed. Those who cling to fables, to superstitions, to the omens that remind us to remember and heed fate, are laughed at both because they believe in fate and because they somehow hope to defeat fate.

Opposite the poem, on the right hand page, Baskin’s crow presses his head against the top of the globe that contains him in a valiant but ultimately fruitless attempt to break free [Figure 3]. His wings are shrugged up against the circle as well and spread out as far as the inscribed boundary allows. The effect is embryonic—the small crow head and flexed wings pushing up and out in an effort at escape. But the lower body of the crow tells a contrasting story. The body is thicker, more mature than the bird’s infant-sized head would suggest. The legs and talons are those of a fully-grown bird. The legs are spread in the shape of an inverted “v” so that the feet straddle the bottom curve of the circle. The crow curls his talons inward, as if resigned to fit himself into the space he is allowed. All at the same time this crow seems to accept the fate ascribed him and to struggle against it. The crow’s stance, with wings spread like arms and legs balanced firmly, is reminiscent of the Vitruvian Man, but here the body’s symmetry is distorted. Is Baskin suggesting the futility of fighting the laws of nature? The seeming perfection of



Fig. 3. First pairing of poem and engraving in *Capriccio*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

the masculine form exemplified by the Vitruvian man is here called into question. The bird's simultaneous acts of struggle and defeat suggest that like Hughes, Baskin sees the necessity of continuing to seek unity even in the face of inevitable defeat. The last lines of Hughes's poem illuminate the arresting contrast between the crow's small, powerless head and muscular legs. The last stanza of "Capriccios" is broken in the middle, with the final three lines set off by parentheses. "You will be laughed at/ For your superstition," is followed by the gruesome parenthetical: "Even so,/ Remembering it: will make your palms sweat,/ The skin lift blistering, both your lifelines bleed." The eyes of Baskin's crow are small black pits, sunken as if already becoming a skull, while his legs and feet ripple sinewy muscle. Both the crow and the "you" of Hughes's poem are held captive by the knowledge of a fate they can see but cannot escape. The crow's body holds all the stages of man in its one form, and his talons are turned inward, ready to puncture the very source of that life. Hughes's "you" feels the effects of foreknowledge on the body, as well. Both the memory of knowing and the memory of the futility of that knowledge enact horror upon the body—the bleeding lifelines of the hands are their own prediction and point to the poised talons of the crow as the fulfillment of fate.

If "Capriccios" and the accompanying engraving set up the presiding notion of the dual goddess, symbolized by Frigga, as representative of man's destructive desire to create dichotomies and subsequently repress his own role in their creation, then "The Mythographers," the third poem in the book, and the facing engraving of a skull wearing a feather headdress establish the results of that repression. At the beginning of "The Mythographers" Hughes makes clear that the fundamental dichotomy of man and woman is immortalized by man's own hand. The mythographers, those who create the myths on

which culture is based, are responsible also for subdividing woman into Lilith, a female demon of the night who seduces men and kills newborns, and Nehama, also a female demon, but more passionate and less violent in her seduction of men. Both Lilith and Nehama are figures from the Kabbalah, the Jewish mysticism that Hughes studied, and are sometimes conflated as the same female demon. In the poem, though, the two women are clearly separate and clearly represent two different visions of woman. Lilith “flap[s] into bedrooms laughing or with a screech/ (The abortion of a laugh). Her abortions/ (Freeing Woman for Man as Man for Woman)/ Decompose to single-cell demons”.¹²⁹ Men cannot ward off Lilith any more than they can disease: “His fever shall be her, hallucinated,/ A dancer with her drummer inside her,/ Flogging herself with her hair, phosphorescent,/ Riding him upside down through the bed-head.”¹³⁰ Lilith is clearly deadly, not just to babies but also to men and other women, and can be associated with Frigga’s role as weaver of fate and goddess of the underworld. Nehama is more subtle in her seduction—she arrives after a man, a “simpleton,” has left his wife because she hasn’t lived up to his image of the kind of woman she should be. Nehama uses passion to seduce the man, but her body is also deadly:

Her saliva: instant amnesia.

The cries of his children: pangs

In a torn-off third arm

Which was his deformity. Her fingers

¹²⁹ Ted Hughes, “The Mythographers.” *Capriccio*. Brackets mine.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

Her knees, her armpits, flying
Buttresses of Dover Cliffs
Numb him as he falls euphoric,

To where his bride Nehama possessing
Some woman's divorced and desperate body,
Under her wig bald as a blown egg-shell,
Starts weeping that she's pregnant,
Takes to her bed.¹³¹

Whereas Lilith uses her own body—demonic, glowing, with whip-length hair—to ravish men, Nehama possesses the bodies of other women and makes men forget the feelings of their own bodies and minds. Lilith denies nature, killing babies and reveling in perversion, while Nehama slyly uses nature to her own benefit, inhabiting the bodies of women, becoming pregnant, getting married, following the required path of the respectable woman, like Frigga in her role as goddess of love, marriage, and birth.

“The Mythographers” reaffirms the dangers inherent in forced duality, reminding us that we are responsible for that duality, but in conjunction with Baskin’s engraving it also meditates on the inescapable reality of duality. Because we created dichotomies, we cannot escape them, but we can recognize that in the end, no matter how different two ends of the spectrum appear, they also inevitably seek unification. At the end of “The Mythographers” Nehama becomes Lilith, the killer of babies, after she is horrified by the grinning skull she sees in the bride’s mirror (again a reference back to Frigga in

¹³¹ Ibid.

“Capriccios”) that seems to foretell the death of her child. The child is, in fact, already a “baby-skull” who Nehama needs to kill “properly dead.” In order to do that she must sacrifice herself also, and in so doing marks her bridegroom with a “star between his eyes.”¹³² Though the death of mother and child are foretold four times over—through mythic cycles, through the fate of mankind, through the nature of the body, and through the symbols of art and literature—the reality of the inevitability of death remains a mystery to the bridegroom who wears a “wretched expression/ Which understands nothing.” Both Lilith and Nehama have been relegated by the mythographers to the world of base physicality, and man, so divorced from his own physical experience, is left uncomprehending, unable to make sense of the physical world. Hughes has often been attacked as a misogynist, and it would be easy to read the poem as an indictment of women as temptresses who destroy men and the creative force at the same time that they hold all procreative power. But taken in conjunction with his understanding of creation myths as the root of destructive dichotomies and his belief that the masculine and feminine must be reunited in order to bring about real healing, the poem can be read as a reiteration of the helplessness with which both women and men play out specified roles over and over. Much of the force of this reading comes from Baskin’s facing engraving. Alone, the poem can be read, as Carol Bere does, as setting the stage for the telling of a mythic tale in which mythic characters can be related to biographical figures (Lilith/Nehama is Assia Wevill, who kills herself and her daughter, and Hughes is the

¹³² Ibid.



Fig. 4. Third pairing of poem and engraving in *Capriccio*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

bemused bridegroom),¹³³ but read in relation to Baskin's engraving, the poem becomes a meditation on the fractured and painful human condition.

The yellowed bone of a skull lies at the center of Baskin's engraving, dominated by the red feathered headdress that swaths the skull [Figure 4]. The feathers are both embracing and menacing—where they encircle the face of the skull, they sprout in rounded tufts, but behind the skull they harden and form a thorny oval, like a dangerous halo, as if to protect the soft front feathers and the fragile, hidden back of the skull. The skull itself is alluring and macabre. The eyes are fleshy globes, not mere sockets as one would expect for a skull, with round black pupils. The jarring open and alive eyes in the hollowed sockets of the skull endow the horror of the skull with a pain that goes beyond physical death. The eyes look scared, trapped, as if a real live man resides within the empty bone, and contrasted with the elongated roots of the skull's upper teeth, which are so long they subsume the nasal cavity almost entirely, the eyes seem almost tender. The duality suggested in Baskin's engraving is not as overtly destructive as that pictured in "The Mythographers," but the inherent destructive forces in the engraving are highlighted by being placed in conjunction with the poem. The subtly corrosive nature of the foreknowledge of death that is overt in Baskin's tender, snarling skull blends with Hughes's insistence on physicality to enforce an integration of body and mind, feminine and masculine, image and word. The desire to categorize and contain that fuels our tendency to make myths and that is embodied in Hughes's recounting of Lilith and Nehama, is symbolized by Baskin as a literal snake pit that conjures up the story of Pandora's Box. The skull's protrusive teeth clamp down on a ring, reminiscent of a bull's nose ring, into and out of which spill stylized writhing snakes. The snakes themselves are

¹³³ Bere 32.

contained within an unmarked rectangle, and their twisting bodies resemble Celtic knots and so recall “horror vacui,” the fear of empty space that compelled Celtic scribes to fill their illuminated manuscripts with complicated knots. The skull’s mouth is closed, so unlike in the myth of Pandora’s Box, the agent who has released the serpents is unclear, but the skull is unmistakably connected to the serpents by the ring dangling from its mouth. Together, Hughes’s poem and Baskin’s engraving suggest that whether man is now aware of it or not, he is driven by the fear of emptiness, or meaninglessness, or death, to fill the world with venomous complications and then deny their origins despite all signs pointing to himself. Perched atop Baskin’s skull is a small taloned bird whose head is cut off just at the eyes. The bird’s wings are spread open like arms with palms up, shoulders hunched in a shrug as if baffled by man’s inability to comprehend the connections between the forces he set in opposition in the first place.

The horror loosed in the world of myth described in “Capriccios” and “The Mythographers” is mirrored in the historical allusions that are either the focus or the background of a number of the poems and engravings. The persecution of the Jews and the harsh realities of primitive man are recurring allusions to historical suffering that come to the fore in “Smell of Burning” and the two engravings that face the poem. Certainly the poem can be read as having a personal element. Carol Bere points out that several of the poems in *Capriccio*, including “Smell of Burning,” “speak of Assia’s entrenched, ceaseless fears of Nazi persecution of the Jews.”¹³⁴ Read with Baskin’s engravings the poem speaks to a greater sense of the forgotten, or hidden, connection between the primitive condition of man, dipping back into pre-history, and the modern

¹³⁴ Bere 35.

horrors man has visited on man. The title of the poem and the imagery of physical pain in the poem converge with Baskin's distorted, primitive masks and the skull abandoned to natural elements to produce a meditation on the cyclical nature of human suffering and on the failure of man to confront his complicity in his own demise. "Smell of Burning" begins in prehistory, with the you, "A small girl" dancing in the Black Forest of Germany like a "Black Forest Giant."¹³⁵ Everyone is happy, "Singing the lightning could not hit you/ Marching among the totems idols."¹³⁶ The world of primitive forests, totems, and idols is happy until organized religion is introduced: "Then came Thunder. After that, the burning."¹³⁷ Hughes associates the coming of a god, Thor, with the beginning of persecution. The origins of persecution are latent even before Thor arrives—the you wears "the sign of lightning to ward off lightning" and is "storm-dancing in other words marching" implying that even before organized religion man attempted to control and impose an artificial order on nature. Destruction as foretold, a foregone conclusion, is implied in Baskin's engravings as well.

Most poems in *Capriccio* are accompanied by a single image, but "Smell of Burning" is accompanied by two, arranged side by side, the first much smaller and less obviously dramatic than the second. Read from left to right, as we read the poem, the two images seem chronologically backward, the first picturing a skull and the second primitive masks, but in conjunction with the poem, the engravings suggest that the end is present even at the beginning [Figure 5]. The skull in the first image is overgrown with fern-like vines that morph into the heads of water birds in the upper left corner,

¹³⁵ Ted Hughes, "Smell of Burning," *Capriccio*.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

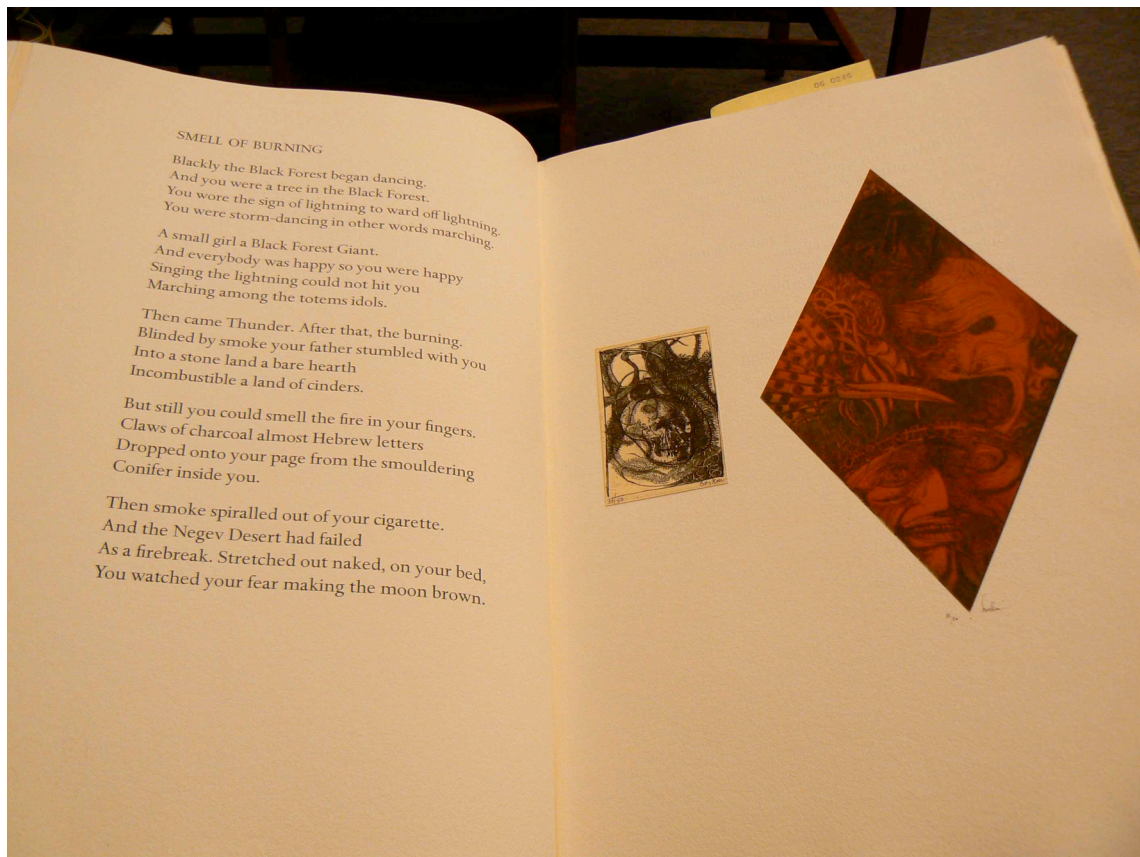


Fig. 5. Twelfth pairing of poem and engraving in *Capriccio*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

suggesting the holocaust of man and the resurgence of nature [Figure 6]. The second image, flaming red in contrast to the first image's muted blacks on cream paper, appears like something out of a primitive nightmare [Figure 7]. The engraving is diamond-shaped and crowded with primitive masks that leer at the viewer. With staring eyes, wide, screaming mouths, pointed beaks, and bared teeth, the masks appear much more menacing than the happy, primitive world at the beginning of "Smell of Burning," and the menace in the image transfers to the poem, emphasizing the latent origins of persecution. Later in the poem, the images are more overtly gruesome:

But the smoke burned your lungs and you glimpsed in it
The occasional flicker of real flame
As the native resins in your body
Gulped at the oxygen. Coughing for oxygen

Were you a German burning tree trying
To flee from burning Germany or
From the burning German tree the victim
Condemned to hang on it?¹³⁸

Hughes's feeling of having "lived quite a lot of my last ten years (at least) somehow unconscious"¹³⁹ is translated into an overriding sense of physical persecution here and in Baskin's second image. While the literal burning obliteration of mankind is alluded to in the middle of the poem and in the first image, mental pain is directly related to physical

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, May 6, 1984, Leonard Baskin Collection, British Library, London.



Fig. 6. Detail of twelfth pairing of poem and engraving in *Capriccio*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.



Fig. 7. Detail of twelfth pairing of poem and engraving in *Capriccio*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

suffering at the end of the poem and in the second image. The you is forced to flee physically but cannot escape the mental pain of physical persecution and so is condemned figuratively to burn and hang from the very thing which once brought her happiness. The images of burning that so preoccupy the poem call attention to the barely noticeable flames that encroach on the edges of the second image, licking just at the corners of the malevolent human masks, reminding us that not only is the destruction of man written into his primitive origins but also that the body, represented by masks, kept separate from the mind, presumably hidden behind the masks, will inevitably end as “the victim,” a skull left unburied, to be obliterated by the natural world.

Many of the poems I have labeled personal also straddle the line with the mythical or historical or both, like “Smell of Burning,” with its focus on the historical but with roots in the personal. The more personal poems, though, center around small events (like walking in snow or listening to Beethoven) or totems (like a locket or a coat) that Hughes enlarges to connect to the mythical and historical. In “Flame,” renting a new house is the local event, but the violent annihilation of the world is connected to seemingly small portents that go barely noticed at the time. As in the other poems, foreknowledge is available but dismissed and destruction is inevitable. Baskin’s facing engraving of a male Gorgon links foreknowledge with physical transformation—in a classic Greek goddess move, Athena transformed a beautiful woman into Medusa and cursed her so that the very sight of her physical presence could transform the viewer into stone, in opposition to natural death when the soul is believed to continue living even while the body deteriorates. In both the poem and the engraving, the body continues to exist, in a perverted form, after the spirit has been annihilated. In “Flame” the you is most likely

Hughes himself, as even Carol Bere admits in a footnote, despite arguing that the poems in *Capriccio* are written to Assia Wevill,¹⁴⁰ because of specific references to moving to the north of England, either Green Farm or Park End, and being “cast” to repeat history. The narrative voice in the poem is less distant, then, than in the other poems in *Capriccio*, particularly those that meditate on myth and history from the stance of other characters. There is an intimate frailty in the confession with which Hughes opens the poem, admitting to the need “For oxygen mask” which he finds in moving to a new location. Being emotionally smothered takes a literal toll on the body, so much so that moving his physical location is the best remedy he can imagine. Even though “The salmon/ Under the stained current of the North Tyne”¹⁴¹ should have brought pleasure to Hughes, who loved to fish, they “Added a suspect ingredient:/ The one, crucial grain of too-much.”¹⁴² Too much physical pleasure, symbolized by the abundance of fish, seems to be a warning to the man who requires an oxygen mask to live, but in the poem he dismisses the sign for practical reasons—“the rent was next to nothing”.¹⁴³ He also does not, at the time, make the connection between rent “measured out/ In exact proportion” and “the oracular book” open to the Duke’s famous speech in Act III, Scene 1 of Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*: ““Be absolute for death: either death or life...””¹⁴⁴ Hughes considered *Measure for Measure* to be a failure as a play in terms of being constrained by a formula

¹⁴⁰ Bere 35.

¹⁴¹ Ted Hughes, “Flame,” *Capriccio*.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

that is not able to control “a whole new body of emotional/imaginative matter,”¹⁴⁵ but he also felt that the play was a major breakthrough for Shakespeare, coming “at a moment of sudden change, or rather transformation, in Shakespeare’s psychic make-up. It records a revolution, where an old worn-out style of being (of thinking and feeling, of self-image) is replaced by a new one.”¹⁴⁶ Even considering Shakespeare oracular, understanding the lines from the play as transformative, the speaker does not connect the words on the page to the life he lives—the daily measuring out that is foretold, the precarious balance between living and dying that will in the end tip toward death: “You had no idea/ What signed bit of paper had found you at last/ After so many years, what detonator/ Waited in your flat/ To include even your wildest hopes/ As so much dirty cobalt/ In the nuclear reaction.”¹⁴⁷ Even though he has always been cast to repeat history, as we all are, even though the paper has been signed for many years, even though he himself is a part of his demise, the speaker has no idea because he has dismissed the signs. The real horror comes in finally realizing the disconnect between knowledge and understanding. The mind may know or the body may know, but real understanding comes when both mind and body know the same thing, in what Hughes calls in the poem “Synchrony so precisely attuned/ You barely had time to open the envelope/ And grab for the telephone/ Before it was all over.” Such moments of absolute understanding are both terrifying and illuminating, and they are ultimately unstable and unsustainable, like a nuclear reaction.

¹⁴⁵ Hughes, *The Letters of Ted Hughes* 405. Hughes was writing to Donya Feuer from the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm. He would revise later letters to her into *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. 412.

¹⁴⁷ Hughes, “Flame,” *Capriccio*.

Such terror is visible in the eyes of Baskin's male Gorgon, who stares out at the reader from the next page, allowing us to feel, to some extent, the same moment of deep understanding, as if we are ourselves paralyzed, poised to become stone, when the images in the poem, the words, converge with the images in the engraving [Figure 8]. The multi-colored snakes may be momentarily distracting, as are the tantalizing biographical details in the poem, but it is the mouth screaming in terror that arrests our vision and visualizes the nuclear reaction at the end of the poem, focusing our attention back to the overarching themes of mental horror manifested as physical pain and cycles of life.

The cycle of *Capriccio* comes full circle in the final poem "Chlorophyl," which Hughes believed could have begun or ended the collection. Though the poem is paired with a specific engraving, of a phoenix rising up out of green-tinted flora [Figure 9], the weight of all the previous images comes to bear in the poem—the skulls that are featured in seven of the twenty-six images speak to "The gravestone"¹⁴⁸; the dense flora of the engravings is winnowed down to "a blade of grass" and "the keys/ Of a sycamore,"¹⁴⁹ which itself speaks to the transformation between life and death since the sycamore is both the Egyptian tree of life and associated with the goddess Nut who is both the goddess of heaven and the goddess who shelters the dead; the "witchy doll"¹⁵⁰ can be seen in Baskin's fantastic masks; and the presiding theme in the poem of objects embedded within other objects ("She sent him a blade of grass, but no word./ Inside it/

¹⁴⁸ Ted Hughes, "Chlorophyl," *Capriccio*.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.



Fig. 8. Nineteenth pairing of poem and engraving in *Capriccio*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

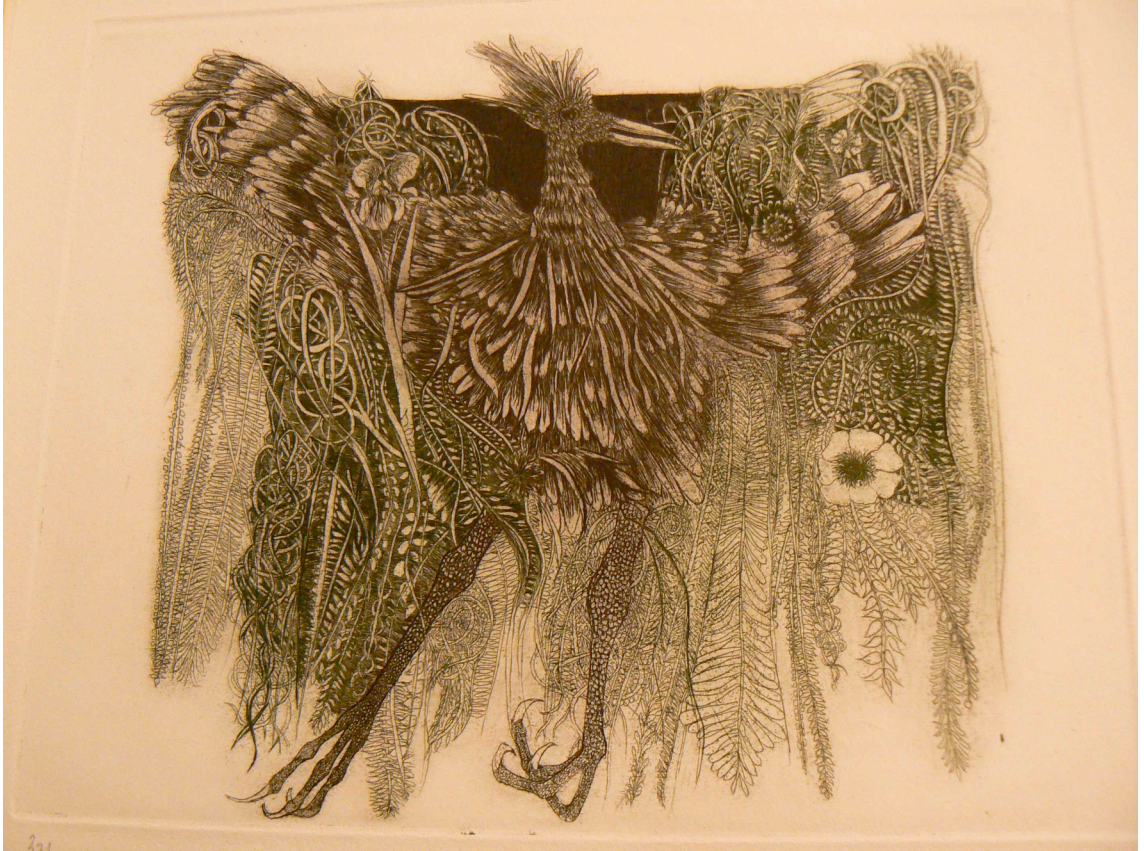


Fig. 9. Twentieth pairing of poem and engraving in *Capriccio*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

The witchy doll, soaked in Dior.”¹⁵¹) is made visible in Baskin’s animals with identifiably human characteristics and human figures with identifiably animal characteristics. Compared to the other poems in *Capriccio*, “Chlorophyl” is spare, built on basic, simple visual images that are imbued with the kind of communicative power we typically reserve for language. But “she” sends the narrator no words, just “a blade of grass” in which is contained not only veiled warnings, but death and finally the promise of life:

She sent him a blade of grass, but no word.

Inside it

The witchy doll, soaked in Dior.

Inside it

The gravestone. Inside it

A sample of her own ashes. Inside it

Her only daughter’s

Otherwise non-existent smile.

Inside it, the keys

Of a sycamore.

Inside those, falling

The keys

Of a sycamore. Inside those,

Falling and turning in air the

Keys

Of a sycamore.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

The repetition and slight shifting of images to break at different words at the ends of lines puts the weight on the ways in which words can fail the image either by some inadequacy, thus the repetition as a desperate attempt to find the right image, or by impermanence, thus the constantly shifting meaning of the image when different words are emphasized. In this poem Hughes actively works against the familiar dichotomy of word and image, suggesting that words do not, in fact, have a kind of temporal permanence that allows for a wider range of expression, but that because of their existence in time, words are always shifting, always changing, always accruing new meaning. Also, he emphasizes the vital visual, spatial aspects of images that words can only gesture toward. Hughes's questioning of the dichotomy in "Chlorophyl" and in *Capriccio* as a whole is not playful, as Loizeaux points out that it is in *Cave Birds*,¹⁵² linked as it is to events in his life that led to his own painful personal transformation, but it is intensely self-conscious and self-referential. There is something both tragic and hopeful in the desire to dig through the layers of pain to find the seed of rebirth, just as Baskin's phoenix symbolizes the human desire to be reborn, triumphant and pristine, after death. The sycamore key, with its small pouch containing the seed and its feathered propeller, "Falling and turning in air," can surely give birth to the phoenix, who in Baskin's vision rises from the intricate, fragile, interconnected flora of the world.

Conclusion

In 1994 Baskin and Hughes embarked on a new collaboration, sparked by Baskin's drawings of skulls. In a postcard Baskin urged Hughes to "think hard about

¹⁵² Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts* 152

‘SKULLS,’ mine will be in your hands by early winter.’¹⁵³ By March of the next year, Hughes had received the skulls, which he called “admirable objects,” but he expressed uncertainty about what approach to take in writing poems for the skulls.¹⁵⁴ A year later Hughes had still not written any skull poems, and after repeated requests from Baskin for information on the skull poems, Hughes finally wrote: “It’s time, the skull project did give me pause. The good thing about *Capriccio*, for me, was the programme—is the fact that there was no programme. We then simply combined what I’d written with what you’d drawn. With the skulls—each skull comes as a cell, a bit of a prison. At least that’s the danger. Each one invited me to compose its story—in some way. That could have been done, no doubt—but I still want more freedom.”¹⁵⁵ In this letter Hughes makes clear that after the freedom to create a collaboration with Baskin that converged on a “deep level,” which he admitted had finally opened up for his writing a path beyond the epic crow project that had seemed to both energize and paralyze him, he did not want to return to creating parallel narrative collaborations. Before their deaths—Hughes died in October, 1998, and Baskin in June, 2000—the two would publish only one more collaboration of their own work, *Howls & Whispers*, published in 1998, which, though much shorter, is similar to *Capriccio* in its lack of a narrative sequence. While it is perhaps true as Leonard Scigaj has argued, that “It would be untrue...to suggest that Hughes needs commissions [from Baskin], or myth or folklore texts to generate creative

¹⁵³ Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, August 20, 1994, Ted Hughes Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

¹⁵⁴ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, March 25, 1995, Leonard Baskin Collection, British Library, London.

¹⁵⁵ Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin, October 13, 1996, Leonard Baskin Collection, British Library, London.

ideas...,”¹⁵⁶ working in collaboration with Baskin over the course of his career clearly did impact the trajectory of Hughes’s writing. What *Capriccio* helped open up for Hughes allowed him to write and publish in 1998 *Birthday Letters*, his most popular and well-received book of poems since *Crow*. The spirit of exchange and friendship in which Hughes and Baskin worked together helped both to confront the painful issues they raised in their art. Their mutual commitment to the honest image lives in their separate work but is most resonant in their collaborations, and particularly in *Capriccio*, which does not turn away from the pain that Baskin describes so eloquently as the human condition: “The forging of works of art is one of man’s remaining semblances to divinity. Man has been incapable of love, wanting in charity, and despairing of hope. He has not molded a life of abundance and peace, and he has charred the earth and befouled the heavens more wantonly than ever before. He has made of Arden a landscape of Death. In this landscape we dwell, and with these images we must live.”¹⁵⁷ *Capriccio* was forged by imperfect men, exploring the destruction man has wrought, and seeking in their art some semblance of unification that might, even in a small way, ameliorate the damage.

¹⁵⁶ Leonard Scigaj, *Ted Hughes*. (Boston: Twayne, 1991) 13. Brackets mine.

¹⁵⁷ Baskin, “The Necessity for the Image” 76.

Chapter Two Scratching the Surface: Frank O’Hara and Larry Rivers’ Integrated Collaboration on *Stones*

Introduction: The Book

Like Hughes and Baskin, poet Frank O’Hara and visual artist Larry Rivers maintained a long and productive friendship. O’Hara, like Hughes, was immersed in the visual arts throughout his career, and amid the numerous poets in the 20th Century who were engaged with the visual arts, O’Hara is the most mythologized “poet among painters,” to use Marjorie Perloff’s phrase. While O’Hara worked on a variety of projects with visual artists, he called his work on *Stones* with Larry Rivers his only real collaboration.¹⁵⁸ *Stones* is a portfolio of twelve lithographic prints, each containing a poem by O’Hara and drawings by Rivers, published by Universal Limited Art Editions in 1959. As with *Capriccio*, *Stones* was published in a limited edition—twenty-five portfolios and five artists proof portfolios—with close attention to material details. The story of the idea behind *Stones* and how O’Hara and Rivers came to collaborate on it is somewhat legendary in the art world since it involves several of the major players in the 1950s New York art scene. Arguably New York in the 1950s was home to the most energetic art scene since the days of studio 291, and O’Hara—as an art critic, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, and a mainstay in various artist’s studios—was a central figure among both the first and second generation Abstract Expressionists. While

¹⁵⁸ Edward Lucie-Smith, “An Interview with Frank O’Hara,” *Standing Still and Walking in New York* ed. Donald Allen (Bolinas, California: Grey Fox Press, 1975) 4.

O'Hara's participation in the project may initially seem like, in Rivers's words, "dopey fate,"¹⁵⁹ it is probably more accurately described as inevitable.

In his book *The Scene: Reports on Post-Modern Art*, Calvin Tomkins narrates the history of Universal Limited Art Editions and its relationships to MOMA and Larry Rivers that led inevitably to O'Hara's work on *Stones*. Universal Limited Art Editions is a lithography studio that was established in 1957 by Tatyana Grosman whose husband Maurice was a New York City artist. Grosman started her studio in a cottage on Long Island as a way to make a living, initially producing silk-screen reproductions.¹⁶⁰ She was unsatisfied with making reproductions, and in 1957 had the profound luck to discover two lithographic stones in her front yard and an old flatbed lithography press in storage at a neighbor's house, which ultimately led her to launch the studio as a lithography studio.¹⁶¹ At the time, lithography was a craft practiced almost exclusively in France, where "the tradition of master lithographic printers has survived for well over a century,"¹⁶² but Grosman's determination and aesthetic taste—she would work only with

¹⁵⁹ Larry Rivers, "Life Among the Stones," *Location* 1.1 (Spring 1963): 92.

¹⁶⁰ Calvin Tomkins, *The Scene: Reports on Post-Modern Art* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976) 70.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. 71-72. Tomkins explains that good lithography stones are rare. The best come from Bavarian quarries that were the source of the stones used by Alois Senefelder, the man who perfected the technique of lithography around 1796. The stones Tatyana Grosman found were small, older stones from the Bavarian quarry.

¹⁶² Ibid. 55-56. Tomkins calls lithography "the most complex of the print techniques" in part because it "requires for its use as an art form the closest possible collaboration between the artist and a printer who is himself a master of his difficult task." In addition, he emphasizes the crucial role the printer plays in the process: "The technical manipulation of the process, the 'cooking' involved in graining the surface of the stone to prepare it for the artist; etching the artist's design with a weak acid solution, so that it will last through multiple impressions; inking and putting the stone through the press; adjusting and altering the various steps until a proof has been pulled that satisfies the artist—all this is done by a professional printer, a specialist who has spent several

artists she admired—led her studio to produce lithographic prints that were “generally acknowledged to be equal or superior to anything being done in Europe or anywhere else.”¹⁶³ Larry Rivers, a friend of the Grosmans, was the first artist to produce a lithographic print at the new studio. After Rivers, other artists, namely Grace Hartigan, Jasper Johns, Helen Frankenthaler, and Robert Rauschenberg, who were also close friends with O’Hara, would work with Grosman at her studio. Even before opening her lithography studio, Grosman had the idea for *Stones*. In an interview with Tomkins, Grosman explained the origin of her idea:

You see, my husband is a painter, and through most of our life together it was his work that interested me—that was my life. And then, in 1955, Maurice had a bad heart attack, and I brought him out here to get well...and then the doctor told me that Maurice would never be so strong again, and I knew that I would have to do something, right away. What was I to do? My great interest, my real passion had always been books, books with visual images. I had just read a book that inspired me very much, a book by Monroe Wheeler called *Modern Painters and Sculptors as Illustrators*, in which he spoke about artists doing graphic work to illustrate books of poetry—Picasso and Matisse and others did that in France—and he said that the most ideal thing would be for an artist and a poet to work together on a book. The idea seemed very beautiful to me. And so I started to work with artists I admired, on silk-screen prints at first. Then, by pure luck, I had just found two lithographic stones in the front yard of our house. Real lithographic stones, which

years learning his trade and who can often help the artist to achieve precisely the effect he is seeking.” 57.

¹⁶³ Ibid. 58. One measure of the success of Universal Limited Art Editions is that MOMA had a deal to purchase the first number of every edition printed by the studio.

had been discarded years and years ago and were being used as part of a path.

And somehow I got the idea that I could use these stones to make a book of the kind Mr. Wheeler had described.¹⁶⁴

Grosman knew she wanted Rivers to be the artist who worked on this book, but she did not know what poet to ask. She first sought advice from O'Hara's publisher Barney Rosset at Grove Press who suggested she ask O'Hara, but since she didn't know O'Hara and found that she "“didn't really understand [his poems] very well,””¹⁶⁵ she decided to ask Rivers in person for advice. When she drove out to Rivers's studio in Southampton, she told him about "“this idea of a book that would be a real fusion of poetry and art, a real collaboration, not just drawings to illustrate poems, and Larry listened, and then he called out, “Hey, Frank!” And down the stairs came a young man in blue jeans. It was Frank O'Hara. And that is how things have happened in my life, they have just worked out somehow.””¹⁶⁶ Barney Rosset would later call the lithograph prints created by O'Hara and Rivers tabloscripts, recalling the link between lithography and the ancient art of inscribing words and images on stones.

Grosman had convinced a commercial lithography printer, Robert Blackburn, to run her press, and it was he who printed the lithographic stones that O'Hara and Rivers inscribed together, working off and on between the summer of 1957 and the spring of 1959. Though Grosman herself knew little about the process of lithography, she worked intimately with Blackburn, Rivers, and O'Hara on the printing of *Stones*, the first book published by Universal Limited Art Editions. Her description of the process emphasizes

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. 61.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. 61.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. 62.

the collaborative nature of the work: ““The way we work is very simple—the artist makes his drawing on the stone, the printer makes a proof, and then the artist decides what he likes or doesn’t like, and makes changes, and maybe I make suggestions, and we select the paper, and that’s how it is.””¹⁶⁷ The paper she wanted for *Stones* was as time consuming to make as were the lithographic stones to inscribe and print. Grosman had already established a relationship with Douglass Howell, a specialist in hand-made paper, and for *Stones* she asked him to create a paper made, in part, out of blue denim because O’Hara had been wearing jeans when she first saw him and because both O’Hara and Rivers wore jeans when working on the lithographic stones.¹⁶⁸ The paper does have a slight blue tint, and each sheet contains variations, though not dramatic, in size and density. The paper is thin enough to be translucent, so when the twelve prints are stacked together images from the bottom layers can be discerned through the top layer, and the edges have the thin, nearly threadbare, quality of large sheets of hand-made paper [Figure 10].

The twelve prints, measuring approximately 19 inches by 23 ¼ inches, are gathered together in a slightly larger portfolio made of three pieces of white cardboard bound with cloth tape and tied in front with raffia. On the top fold of the portfolio is

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 60. Grosman’s description of the process is a bit of an oversimplification. Tomkins explains that lithography is both time-consuming and technically difficult: “Lithography is based on the mutual antipathy of oil and water. In its classic form, the lithographer draws with a greasy substance on a smoothly ground block of limestone; the stone is etched, processed, and then moistened with water, which the greasy markings reject; it is then rolled with printer’s ink, which adheres to the greasy, drawn portions and is rejected by the moist, undrawn portions; a sheet of paper pressed down on this surface absorbs the ink, and the result is a reversed impression of the original drawing on the stone. With subsequent inkings the process can be repeated through many impressions before the drawing wears out.” 56.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. 73.

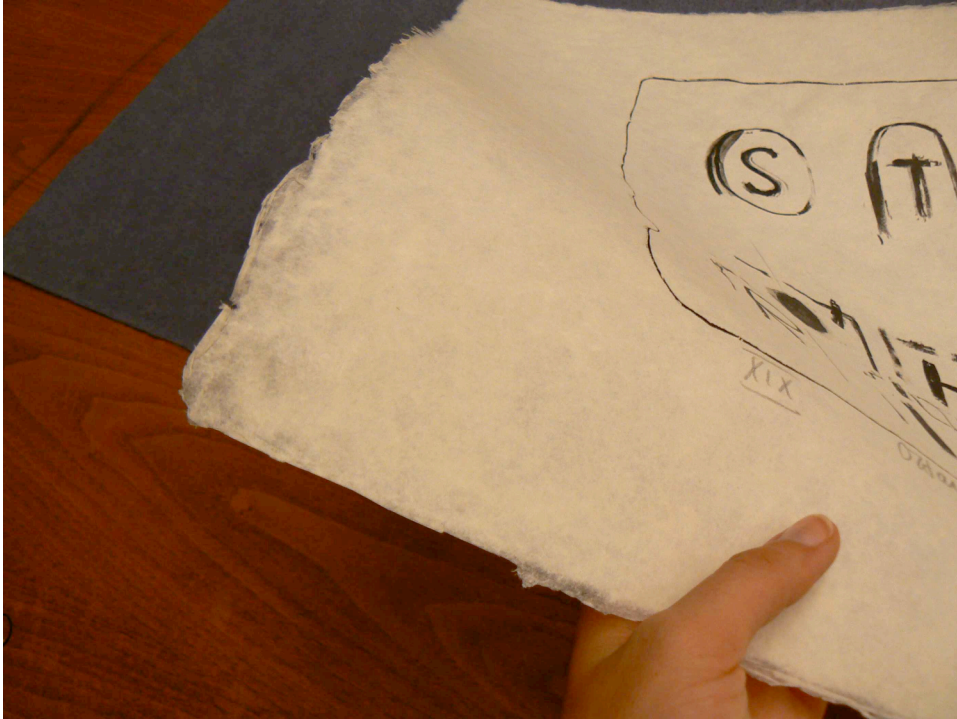


Fig. 10. Title page from *Stones*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

screenprinted in black, “Stones,” and on the bottom fold, in the same hand, is printed “Rivers ’57-59 O’Hara” [Figure 11]. Also included in the portfolio are pages meant to distinguish *Stones* from a random collection of prints in an artist’s portfolio: a frontispiece, title page, and colophon, all meant to mark the portfolio’s affinity to the traditional book. The frontispiece differs with each numbered portfolio—some were specially designed for specific recipients, such as the number one portfolio designed for and housed at MOMA or the number seven portfolio designed for Jane and Arthur Emil and pictured on the Universal Limited Art Editions website, while others are generic, such as the number nineteen portfolio housed at Emory—but each is either an oil or colored chalk drawing, on blue denim handmade paper, that identifies the number of the portfolio in addition to the names O’Hara and Rivers and the date, ’57-59, carried over from the portfolio cover [Figure 12]. Below the frontispiece is the title page, a lithographic print, that announces the title, *Stones*, and the authors’ names in rough block print. Decorating the letters of the title and names are sketches that resemble different stone shapes. While the “s” of the title is circled, the other decorated letters allude to the shapes of tombstones, such as the half round arch sketched over the “t” and “e” of the title, the oval with shoulders over the “n” of the title and the “i” and second “r” of Rivers, the deep ogee that travels down the right side of the last letters in both names, and the square tops that cover the “o,” “h,” “a,” and “r” of O’Hara and the initial “r” of Rivers [Figure 13]. There is something both playful and sinister in the combination of the fanciful, imperfect shapes with the heavy black lines and monumental associations. The spontaneity with which O’Hara and Rivers approached this collaboration, a point I will return to, is burdened by the weight of the process and materials of lithography. O’Hara



Fig. 11. Portfolio cover for *Stones*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.



Fig. 12. Frontispiece from *Stones*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

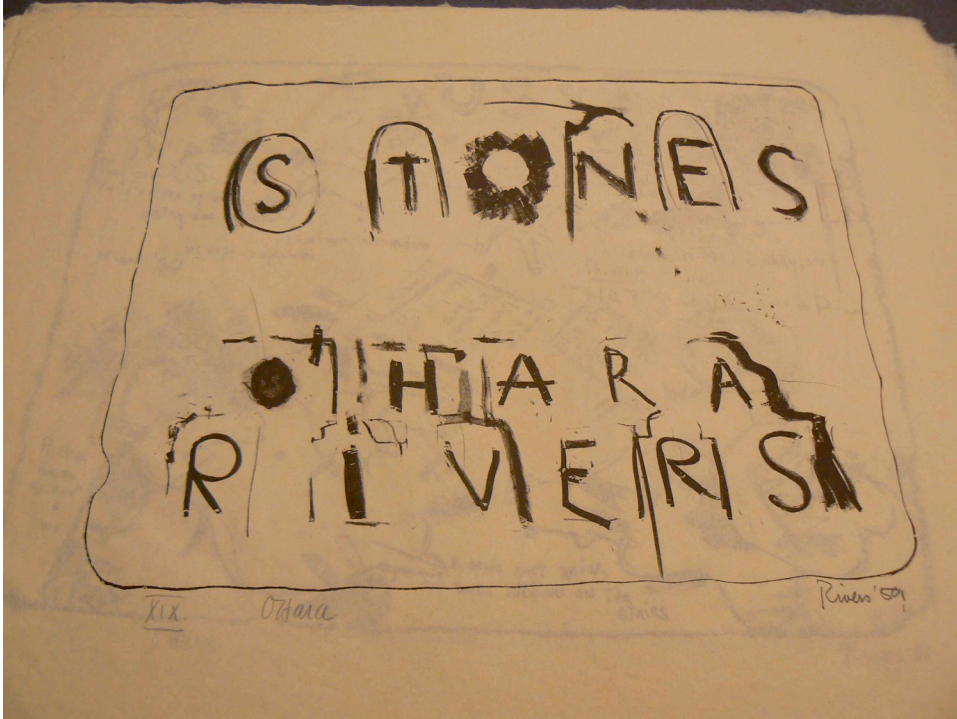


Fig. 13. Title page from *Stones*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

and Rivers consistently seek to counteract the weight of permanence suggested by the tombstone shapes and by the literal lithographic stones through their dark humor and active, gestural strokes. The title page is at once permanent since it is literally etched in stone and ephemeral since its crudely decorated letters—the uneven, blocky letters and shapes look almost childlike—celebrate the imperfection of the momentary.

Taken together with the colophon positioned as the last page of the book, the title page announces that *Stones* is both serious and playful. If the title page suggests a tension between permanence and transience, the colophon confirms it. The colophon defines the word “tabloscript” as the material resulting “where the artist and poet inspired by the same theme, draw and write on the same surface at the same time, fusing both arts to an inseparable unity.”¹⁶⁹ Above this definition, nestled between the mundane information about date of printing and the name of the publisher, is the curious statement, “Stones destroyed after printing.”¹⁷⁰ Part of the allure of lithography is the artist’s ability to recreate the art ad infinitum, or at least as long as the stones don’t wear out, providing for the kind of enduring commercial potential and certain permanence writers experience when their work is mechanically reproduced. O’Hara and Rivers err on the side of the precious art object, though, choosing to destroy the original so that the thirty printed portfolios in existence become the only originals.¹⁷¹ Their decision to destroy the lithographic stones after printing speaks to their commitment to emphasizing the physical

¹⁶⁹ Frank O’Hara and Larry Rivers, *Stones* (Long Island, New York: Universal Limited Art Editions, 1959).

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ The colophon does not clarify how the original lithographic stones were destroyed, a term that can refer to several processes, such as grinding down the stone to remove the drawing, heavily scoring through the drawing, or breaking the stone, all of which render the stone useless for creating new prints of the original work.

process of collaboration over the permanence of the product, rather than necessarily making the portfolios “precious” (though they are, of course, more economically valuable). Both O’Hara and Rivers were interested in what Harold Rosenberg had dubbed “action painting,” what O’Hara defined as “the physical reality of the artist and his activity in expressing it, united to the spiritual reality of the artist in a oneness which has no need for the mediation of metaphor or symbol.”¹⁷² In many ways, *Stones* is an experiment in action book making, and in studying the processes of the physical collaboration between O’Hara and Rivers I hope to shed light on the material product. For as much as the contents of the prints are entertaining, even delightful at times, the content is inseparable from the process, so reading *Stones* is a process, too, of sifting through layers of literal prints (like *Capriccio*, *Stones* is unwieldy to read), sifting through layers of allusions (many of which are indecipherable without special knowledge of O’Hara and Rivers’ relationship), and sifting through the layers of the integrated collaborative process.

Integrated Collaboration: The Process

In many ways, *Stones* seems to represent the kind of ideal, pure collaboration we imagine when thinking of two people working together. Unlike Hughes and Baskin, and C. D. Wright and Deborah Luster, to whom I turn in the next chapter, O’Hara and Rivers were always in physical proximity when working on *Stones*. O’Hara marks this kind of proximity as important when he announces that he and Rivers “did physically collaborate.”¹⁷³ For O’Hara, the closeness of collaboration had as much to do with

¹⁷² Frank O’Hara, “Jackson Pollock,” *Art Chronicles: 1954-1966* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1990) 35.

¹⁷³ Lucie-Smith 4.

corporeal closeness—“We worked on the stones together. He did not work on the stone if I wasn’t there and I didn’t work on the stone if he wasn’t there to see what I was doing”¹⁷⁴—as with mental, emotional, or artistic closeness, those factors that are at the fore in the relationships between Hughes and Baskin and Wright and Luster. Certainly, O’Hara and Rivers were close mentally, emotionally, and artistically, but physicality is at the heart of all aspects of their relationship, so it is not surprising that it is at the heart of their collaborative relationship. Though Wayne Koestenbaum’s book *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration* focuses exclusively on writers, his overall premise, that double authorship challenges “literary property” and “sexual propriety,”¹⁷⁵ is instructive here. Of the three collaborations I examine, *Stones* most overtly and most insistently challenges both by fusing the verbal and visual materially and by blurring the signifying boundaries of each. Koestenbaum asserts that “books with two authors are specimens of a relation, and show writing to be a quality of motion and exchange, not a fixed thing.”¹⁷⁶ Motion and exchange are central tenets in the process of all of the collaborators I discuss, but for O’Hara and Rivers it is also the central thesis of their collaboration. The personal relationship between two men becomes the occasion, the technique, and the subject of *Stones*.

The titillating details of the sexual relationship between O’Hara and Rivers are not hard to come by. In his autobiography *What Did I Do? The Unauthorized Autobiography*, Rivers confesses to mixed feelings about his sexual relationship with

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Wayne Koestenbaum, *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 9.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. 2.

O'Hara. On the one hand, he concludes, "the personal and physical appeal Frank and I had for each other, less and less consciously expressed by the time he died, lent to all our meetings something like a whooping glee,"¹⁷⁷ but on the other hand he insists, "I was uncomfortable as the object of his affection. Pursuing the object of *my* affection, females, was more usual, subsequently, more comfortable."¹⁷⁸ Still, his sexual relationship with O'Hara was not his only homosexual relationship, nor was Rivers, by any stretch, O'Hara's only sexual interest. In the most comprehensive biography of O'Hara to date, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara*, Brad Gooch focuses on the personal relationships that sprang up among the artists and writers whose social lives merged at the Cedar, "the artists' tavern"¹⁷⁹ in New York City. According to Gooch, the Cedar provided both a welcoming artistic atmosphere—O'Hara himself notes, "for most of us non-academic, and indeed non-literary poets in the sense of the American scene at the time, the painters were the only generous audience for our poetry"¹⁸⁰—and a place where "the excessiveness of the period matched his own penchant for excesses."¹⁸¹ Though Gooch is perhaps overly concerned with detailing the torrid nature of O'Hara's affairs with artists, actors, musicians, dancers, and writers, his emphasis on O'Hara's participation in the saloon-like atmosphere of the Cedar highlights the importance to

¹⁷⁷ Larry Rivers, *What Did I Do? The Unauthorized Autobiography* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1992) 466.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 232.

¹⁷⁹ Brad Gooch, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993) 201.

¹⁸⁰ Frank O'Hara, "Larry Rivers: A Memoir," *Standing Still and Walking in New York* ed. Donald Allen (Bolinas, California: Grey Fox Press, 1975) 169.

¹⁸¹ Gooch 203.

O'Hara of personal relationships, especially with the painters who understood his poetry and accepted him into their artistic circle.

O'Hara famously turned female artists, most notably Bunny Lang, Jane Freilicher, and Grace Hartigan, into muses and confidants with whom he flirted openly, but though he did work with Hartigan on *Oranges*, the title of Hartigan's show at the Tibor de Nagy gallery at which was sold a mimeographed collection of the twelve poems of O'Hara's that inspired the show,¹⁸² he reserved physical collaboration for working with men. He embarked on theatre and film collaborations with John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Arnold Weinstein, John Gruen, and Al Leslie; on verbal-visual collaborations with Larry Rivers, Norman Bluhm, Jasper Johns, and Joe Brainard; and on literary collaborations with Bill Berkson, Larry Rivers, Joe LeSueur, and Tony Towle. Like Hughes, O'Hara was intensely interested in the discoveries he could make by working with others, and his writing is perhaps as dependent on the fruits of those relationships as Hughes's writing was on his relationship with Baskin. Many of O'Hara's poems were written during breaks when he worked at MOMA, legendarily scribbled on scraps while at the Cedar, written to or about artists, or composed in the studios of his artist friends. *Second Avenue*, his longest and one of his most celebrated poems, was written primarily in Rivers's studio that overlooked Second Avenue.

O'Hara and Rivers met in 1950 at a party at John Ashbery's apartment in New York. Both had been told by Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler that they would "hit it off,"¹⁸³ and according to their accounts, they did. As O'Hara recalls, they did "like each other: I thought he was crazy and he thought I was even crazier. I was very

¹⁸² Ibid. 236.

¹⁸³ Rivers, *What Did I Do?* 228.

shy, which he thought was intelligence; he was garrulous, which I assumed was brilliance—and on such misinterpretations, thank heavens, many a friendship is based.”¹⁸⁴ Rivers’s recollection is somewhat more detailed:

We shook hands and talked our heads off for two hours. Repairing to a quiet spot behind a window drape, we kissed...I liked his Ivy League dirty white sneakers, he liked my hands full of paint. He was a charming madman, a whoosh of air sometimes warm and pleasant, sometimes so gusty you closed your eyes and brushed back the hair it disarranged. He was thin and about five seven. He walked on his toes, stretched his neck, and angled his head, all to add an inch or two to his height. I never walked the same after I met him.¹⁸⁵

After O’Hara moved to New York permanently in 1951, he spent time with Rivers at the Tibor de Nagy gallery, the Cedar, and Rivers’s Second Avenue studio where Rivers painted his first portrait of O’Hara.¹⁸⁶ O’Hara was popular among poets and painters—after his accidental death in 1966, Bill Berkson and Joe LeSueur collected in *Homage to Frank O’Hara* the reminiscences of over seventy people who had felt close to him—but his association with Rivers was his most sustained relationship with a visual artist.

Both Rivers and O’Hara were proponents of action painting, and neither was interested in the pure abstraction common to many first generation Abstract Expressionists. In their poetry and paintings, both were interested in the moment—as O’Hara notes realizing on his first visit to Rivers’s studio, “His main interest was

¹⁸⁴ O’Hara, “Larry Rivers: A Memoir” 169.

¹⁸⁵ Rivers, *What Did I Do?* 228.

¹⁸⁶ Rivers’s second painting of O’Hara, painted at the Southampton studio in 1954, is the more famous nude painting that stirred controversy when it was first shown at the de Nagy.

obviously in the immediate situation.”¹⁸⁷ In her important study, *Frank O’Hara: Poet Among Painters*, Marjorie Perloff quotes from this same interview to highlight the aesthetic affinities between O’Hara and Rivers:

Rivers’s aesthetic turns out to be remarkably close to O’Hara’s despite their very different backgrounds. Rivers came from a poor Jewish family...He started out as a jazz musician, worked for a time as a delivery boy for an art-supply house, and only then turned to the study of painting...His world was thus quite unlike the provincial Catholic milieu of Baltimore and Grafton, Mass., in which Frank was raised, or the Harvard of John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch, or even the sophisticated world of the Museum of Modern Art. Nevertheless Rivers’s view of art is immediately familiar to anyone who has read O’Hara. He rejects the primacy of subject matter in painting, insisting that the *how* supercedes the *what*. Like O’Hara, he stresses the importance of ‘the immediate situation’ (p. 108), of energy, of the role of ‘accident’ in art (p. 117), and of the need to evade ‘the discomforts of boredom.’”¹⁸⁸

O’Hara and Rivers were both drawn to Symbolist and Surrealist artists and writers, especially Apollinaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Ernst, Duchamp, and Picasso, in whose work they admired the immediacy and materiality. If their aesthetic sensibilities dovetailed so well, their personal relationship was not as easy. From the time they met to O’Hara’s death, they remained friends, though that friendship was marked by periods of avoidance and silence, and by an uneven balance of emotions—Gooch reports the poet John

¹⁸⁷ Frank O’Hara, “Larry Rivers: ‘Why I Paint As I Do,’” *Horizon: A Magazine of the Arts* 2.1 (September 1959): 95.

¹⁸⁸ Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O’Hara: Poet Among Painters* (New York, George Braziller, 1977) 93.

Ashbery telling him that O'Hara had never really been in love with anybody until Rivers,¹⁸⁹ while Rivers dodges the question: "something happened that resembled a romantic fling in the realm that dares not speak its name."¹⁹⁰ O'Hara sought out Rivers's presence, often spending up to a month at a time at his house in Southampton, and it was always Rivers's discomfort with their sexual attraction that led to their periodic separations. In the summer of 1954, during their first major break, O'Hara wrote to Rivers, "I miss you so much that, at the risk of seeming fatuous I thought I'd let you know it."¹⁹¹ Despite the turbulence of their sexual relationship, they sustained a deep reliance on each other aesthetically. As Rivers recalls, "From the earliest moments of our friendship we were enthusiastic about each other's work. Frank O'Hara was a big influence on me, but I think I influenced him too; I was already a working artist in New York."¹⁹²

So much of the minutiae of O'Hara's life and of his relationship with Rivers is recorded in part because his social circle of artists and writers was so keenly aware of and self-consciously reflective on the illusory moment and in part because of the outpouring of memoirs in the wake of O'Hara's untimely death. Where Hughes shunned the spotlight, O'Hara and Rivers both sought and embraced it, and just as Hughes's biography has the potential to distract, so does the shared biography of O'Hara and Rivers. Their physical relationship is, I hope to show, important to understanding *Stones*, and its importance rests primarily in the way that physical presence serves as a key

¹⁸⁹ Gooch 227.

¹⁹⁰ Rivers, *What Did I Do?* 227.

¹⁹¹ Quoted in Gooch 254.

¹⁹² Rivers, *What Did I Do?* 230.

facilitator of the collaborative process and a central theme of the collaboration. In his article “Life Among the Stones,” published in 1963, Rivers stresses the role physical presence and physical relations play in the making of *Stones*. He begins by reminiscing about the books combining the work of poets and painters that he saw as a student in Paris, which at the time gave him “the notion that there was some intrinsic good in painters and poets working together. It seemed like socialism in its smallest and most personal form. There was a glorious halo around the idea of each inspiring the other.”¹⁹³ From his current viewpoint, though, Rivers confesses that the work of collaboration seems now to him more like an act of cruelty: “My cruelty consists of destroying the ease I see in the presence of cliché and vogue.”¹⁹⁴ By highlighting this shift in his thinking, Rivers moves collaboration from the realm of abstraction, where poet and painter work to achieve an ideal, to the realm of physicality, where poet and painter destroy in order to create. As Rivers narrates the arrival of Tatyana Grosman, whom he calls “this Siberian lady Tanya,”¹⁹⁵ at his Southampton house and his and O’Hara’s decision to take on the collaboration she proposed, he continues to emphasize the physical, alluding to the project as a baby born of their aesthetic relationship: “On the basis of what had been gestating in us for many years we agreed to do it. We entered, O holy, into a direct relationship with the past. We were grown up but we wanted to taste that special lollypop

¹⁹³ Rivers, “Life Among the Stones” 90.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. 91.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

Picasso, Matisse, Miro, Apollinaire, Eluard and Aragon had tasted and find out what it was like.”¹⁹⁶

One aspect, then, of physical relation expressed in *Stones* is between the aesthetic of action shared by O’Hara and Rivers and the aesthetic of their Symbolist, Dadaist, and Surrealist forebears. The frenzied, haphazard, overlapping forms of *Stones* recall earlier experiments in improvisation, spatial typography, and collage, while also questioning the limitations of abstraction and the inertia of style. The other prominent aspect of physical relation expressed in *Stones* is more personal. Rivers spends a good bit of time establishing the importance of shared experience with O’Hara and tries to show that their personal lives and individual aesthetics were inseparable. He recounts their knowledge of each other’s work, their use of each other in their art (Rivers painted, drew, and sculpted O’Hara, and O’Hara wrote to and about Rivers and his work), and their enmeshed work and social time. In the campy tone he shared with O’Hara, Rivers writes:

There is no doubt in my mind if the idiots and garbage collectors who shovel up ideas for Hollywood and T.V. run out of material, even further from now, our lives could easily be made into a cornball modern *Vie de Boheme*. Instead of calling it *Moulin Rouge* with a dwarf and a few whores it could be called ‘The Cedar Bar’ with fags, dope addicts, and an endless and exhausting amount of ‘names.’ I think we saw each other constantly. If at those times who’s fucking who and how miserable someone is making someone else took up a good deal of time so did ‘What did you paint or write or think today?’ I just reread a few paragraphs. Maybe all this sounds like Molly Berg reminiscing about her Yiddish *Mama* with a Greenwich Village variation on the theme. It must be excused or

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. 92.

rather I insist it be accepted as part of this experience I'm trying to describe. This Siberian lady didn't just find some painter and some poet who would work together. She asked two men who really knew each other's work and life backwards which means to include all the absurdity of civilization a lively mind sees in friendship and art."¹⁹⁷

His insistence on the connection between life and art, and on the fact that the connection between the two is material in that it happens in real places between real people, is a reflection of the material concerns in *Stones* and an encapsulation of “the doctrine of Action Painting (and, by implication, Action Poetry)—the belief that the materials used by the artist exist in their own right; they are not merely means to the creation of mimetic illusion.”¹⁹⁸ Rivers asserts, and O'Hara seems to have agreed, that because it was made by a poet and an artist whose life and art were already intertwined, *Stones* is *a priori* a collaboration.

Even before they began the collaboration, O'Hara and Rivers knew one way in which their work would differ from the work of previous collaborators: “Frank O'Hara wasn't going to write a poem that I would set a groovy little image to. Nor were we going to assume the world was waiting for his poetry and my drawing which is what the past ‘collaborations’ now seem to have been. Our self image, mind you, was no less grandiose than those old Parisians but it was another time and we had our own balls to take care of.”¹⁹⁹ The double-entendre of “balls” points both to the new aesthetic ground O'Hara and Rivers wanted to break and to the more self-conscious bodiliness they wanted to

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. 92.

¹⁹⁸ Perloff 50.

¹⁹⁹ Rivers, “Life Among the Stones” 93.

bring to their collaborative process and to the material collaboration. With that in mind, Rivers moves on in his essay to describe the physical characteristics of the lithographic stone and the difficulties of the medium:

The lithograph stone surface is very smooth. The marks going on it can be made with a rather difficult to handle, almost rubbery crayon or with a dark liquid called Touche. I had never seen any of the necessary equipment before this and if I wasn't thinking about a Picasso or Matisse print I thought printmaking the dull occupation of pipe-smoking corduroy deep-type artisans. Whatever you do comes out opposite to the way you put it down. In order for the writing to be read it must be done backwards. It is almost impossible to erase, one of my more important crutches. Technically it was really a cumbersome task. One needed the patience of another age, but our ignorance and enthusiasm allowed us to jump into it without thinking about the details and difficulties.²⁰⁰

The difficulty of mastering the lithographic technique can account, in some part, for the somewhat primitive appearance of the earlier prints, but by the fourth print, "Love," O'Hara's printing is more controlled and Rivers's drawings less hesitant.²⁰¹ Wrestling with difficulty is part of the physical process of collaboration. As soon as their dexterity with the medium becomes too accomplished, as it does in the sixth print, "Music," O'Hara and Rivers attempt to push through stylistic mastery by drawing on a different, lower art form, the comic, in print seven. I will return to and expand on this point in my integrated reading, but for now it is important to note that O'Hara and Rivers were conscious of maintaining an active, evolving material process as a central element in their

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ O'Hara used a mirror to help him write backwards on the lithographic stone.

collaboration. They were conscious, too, of making that process into the subject itself. Rivers notes, “Each time we got together we decided to choose some very definite subject and since there was nothing we had more access to than ourselves the first stone was going to be called ‘us.’ Oh yes, the title always came first. It was the only way we could get started.”²⁰² Each time they worked together, O’Hara and Rivers continued to draw on the “us” they knew and to push forward with a new kind of collaboration. Visually, “their decision to ink the edges of the stones gives the prints in this volume a storyboard frame,” which further underscores the physicality of the collaboration.²⁰³ Though on the surface the title of each stone dictated a different subject matter, the process of the collaboration, extended over two years and broken sometimes by months between work sessions,²⁰⁴ allowed them to create a whole driven by the continued commitment to process and physical connection.

Stones in Context: The 1950s Art Scene

Marjorie Perloff has well established the extent to which O’Hara’s poetry was influenced by the art world in which he worked and socialized. She notes that because “none of the existing movements of the fifties could provide a model for what he considered *poetry*,”²⁰⁵ O’Hara sought to create his own, which Perloff calls “the aesthetic of attention”²⁰⁶ and which derives from the desire “to force oneself to ‘see’ in new ways,

²⁰² Ibid. 93-94.

²⁰³ Deborah Wye, *Artists and Prints: Masterworks from The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2004) 155.

²⁰⁴ Rivers, “Life Among the Stones” 94.

²⁰⁵ Perloff 19.

²⁰⁶ Ibid. 1.

to *defamiliarize* the object,”²⁰⁷ something O’Hara found most accessible in the current visual arts world. Perloff points out that long before he had moved to New York, O’Hara was developing a poetic aesthetic that drew from the visual arts, but that in order “to get beyond the Williams mode as well as the rather frozen Surrealism of ‘Dido’ and ‘Jane Awake,’ he had to make contact with the artistic milieu of New York.”²⁰⁸ After a year of living full time in New York, O’Hara wrote “Chez Jane,” which Perloff calls “one of [his] first ‘painterly’ poems” and “one of the best Surrealist poems in English.”²⁰⁹ Much of Perloff’s study of O’Hara’s poetry focuses on its ekphrastic qualities—his adaptation of visual arts techniques as well as his writing about visual art. Indeed, most critical studies of O’Hara and the visual arts focus on ekphrasis,²¹⁰ but, while most studies give only cursory attention to the collaborations, Perloff devotes a fair amount of time to situating O’Hara’s work on what she calls “*poem-paintings*”²¹¹ within the larger context of his ekphrasis. She traces O’Hara’s interest in collaboration to his affinity for Apollinaire, “who wrote poems ‘after’ paintings...and whose *Calligrammes* contain fascinating experiments with verbal-visual composition,”²¹² and the “*peinture-poésie*” of

²⁰⁷ Ibid. 22.

²⁰⁸ Ibid. 57.

²⁰⁹ Ibid. 63.

²¹⁰ For a brief but representative example, see Ira Sadoff’s “Frank O’Hara’s Intimate Fictions,” *American Poetry Review* Nov.-Dec. 2006: 49-52. Drawing off Perloff’s work, Sadoff argues that “action painting became poems in perpetual motion (accomplished by enjambments and long breathless sentences); tonal issues (dramatized by color in painting) were pursued with a broad range of dictions; and, like many postmodern texts and paintings that would follow him, O’Hara made use of Lichtenstein’s comic book studies and Rothko’s somber abstractions, blurring the lines between high and low culture.” 49.

²¹¹ Perloff 96.

²¹² Ibid.

the Surrealists and Dadaist, even though they were “almost never the result of collaboration.”²¹³ Perloff is careful to distinguish between these aesthetic forebears and the collaborative work of *Stones*, as Rivers does himself when describing how he and O’Hara wanted to embark on a new kind of collaboration. Just as important as those models to the conception and execution of *Stones*, I contend, is the personal relationship between O’Hara and Rivers and their common aesthetic as they understood it in active defiance of mainstream attitudes in the art world.

As welcoming as the Cedar was to O’Hara, the atmosphere was also, according to Gooch, suffused with false bravado. In particular, “the din of the Cedar regularly hit a high note with Pollock’s explosions of fist-fighting or shouting.”²¹⁴ Pollock denigrated black, female, and homosexual patrons, and “on at least one occasion he called O’Hara a ‘fag’ to his face and was enough of a menace that O’Hara fled the Cedar one night when he heard that Pollock was on a drunken rampage.”²¹⁵ On the one hand, such “excess” was exhilarating to O’Hara, but on the other both he and Rivers found themselves increasingly fighting against the hypermasculinity embodied by the action painting they both admired. In “Frank O’Hara Nude with Boots: Queer Ekphrasis and the Statuesque Poet” Brian Glavey pinpoints the dissonance:

The rapid changes underway in postwar America brought with them widespread anxieties about masculinity, anxieties embodied with particular force in the swaggering machismo of the abstract expressionists. As Michael Leja notes, the aura of heroic autonomy associated with figures such as Jackson Pollock and

²¹³ Ibid. 96-97.

²¹⁴ Gooch 204.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

Willem de Kooning served as ‘a crucial component of Cold War national identity, differentiating the nation politically and culturally from a Europe portrayed as weak and effeminate.’ Action painting exemplified the power and spontaneity of this artistic masculinity central to the politics of American art, an understanding of the artist directly at odds with O’Hara’s self-display.²¹⁶

O’Hara and Rivers’s physical collaboration on an action book can be considered an overt challenge to the “sexual propriety” of traditional masculinity as inherent in action painting and an overt challenge to the accompanying arguments that visual art should abandon representation in an effort to enforce clear boundaries between it and other artistic media. Glavey makes clear that heteronormativity and artistic purity are intimately bound by examining the influential art critic Clement Greenberg’s argument in the 1940 article “Towards a Newer Laocoon.” By linking Greenberg’s “dedicat[ion] to the maintenance of clear and distinct boundaries between the arts, as well as to the proposition that the disruption of these boundaries is a symptom of moral—not merely aesthetic—confusion” to his famous claim equating “the success of the avant-garde with the fact that ‘the arts have been hunted back to their mediums, and there they have been isolated, concentrated, and defined,’” Glavey argues that, “this rhetoric takes on intensified resonance in the Cold War climate of the early 1950s, in which homosexuals and communists were being hunted, isolated, and defined by the United States government.”²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Brian Glavey, “Frank O’Hara Nude with Boots: Queer Ekphrasis and the Statuesque Poet,” *American Literature* 79.4 (December 2007): 784.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.* 795.

The second generation Abstract Expressionists, including Rivers, Hartigan, and Freilicher, were increasingly rebelling “against the hegemony of abstraction as well as the hypermasculine artistic ethos that accompanied it,”²¹⁸ and O’Hara was at the fore in defending them. In his 1954 essay “Nature and the New Painting,” which sparked a panel discussion with Greenberg held at the Artists Club, O’Hara asserts:

Two years ago in a talk at the Hansa Gallery, Clement Greenberg declared that abstraction was the major mode of expression in our time, that any other mode was necessarily minor; this was straight observation from the point of view of historical criticism. But a year later James Fitzsimmons, writing in *Arts and Architecture*, remarked that some of the young painters had lost heart and abandoned abstract-expressionism in cowardly fashion to return to representational work. It is against just such an implied protocol that abstract-expressionism has always taken up a strong position, whether at the Metropolitan Museum or the Artists Club.²¹⁹

Written in the cool, academic tone of his public criticism, O’Hara’s essay makes clear that he thinks the hypermasculine critique of the second generation Abstract Expressionists as “cowardly” because of their embrace of representation, deemed by Greenberg to fall under the rubric of literature rather than visual art, itself undermines the spirit with which the first generation Abstract Expressionists set out to undo protocols. By engaging in their physical collaboration, Rivers and O’Hara sought to counter a renewed insistence on the separation of the arts while at the same time attempting to

²¹⁸ Ibid. 793.

²¹⁹ Frank O’Hara, “Nature and New Painting,” *Standing Still and Walking in New York* ed. Donald Allen (Bolinas, California: Grey Fox Press, 1975) 43-44.

subvert the accompanying assumptions of macho masculinity. Instead of facing the traditional gendering of words as masculine and images as feminine, O'Hara and Rivers faced a politicized art world dominated by practitioners and critics of visual art who, as dominant, could attempt to re-gender word and image in what they saw as their favor and codify masculinity as machismo. Glavey makes a critical point when he contends that O'Hara's response to this atmosphere was not to try reversing the genders again, which would have confirmed rather than disrupted tradition, but to challenge that machismo: "Rather than associate this embrace of visibility with feminization, however, O'Hara created a homoerotic masculinity endowed with the value and authority of modernist art."²²⁰ *Stones* is as much an effort to challenge protocols of sexuality and media hegemony as an effort to produce a "real collaboration."

Reading *Stones*: Scratching the Surface

When describing the first tabloscript of *Stones*, titled "US," Rivers provides a detailed account of how he and O'Hara negotiated their collaborative relationship. His description, in Perloff's words, "stresses the *improvisational* character of the collaboration, its status as an event or happening rather than as a predetermined, planned 'work of art.'"²²¹ As important, Rivers stresses the way each art and artist fed off the other while working:

I did something, whatever I could, which related in some way to the title of the stone and he either commented on what I had done or took it somewhere else in any way he felt like. If something in the drawing embarrassed him he could alter the quality by the quality of his words or vice versa. Sometimes I would designate

²²⁰ Glavey 784.

²²¹ Perloff 101.

an area that I was sure I was going to leave empty. He might write there or if I did put something down I would direct him to write whatever he wished but ask that it start at a specific place and end up a square or rectangular thin or fat shape of words over or around my image. With these images vague or not vague and his words we were at once remarking about some subject and decorating the surface of the stone.²²²

This kind of improvisation, in which one act provokes another in rapid succession, could not have happened without physical proximity. In their commitment to active exchange O'Hara and Rivers show their desire to distinguish their collaboration from previous verbal-visual collaborations. "US" is the busiest, most energetic of all the tabloscripts and, as the first, announces the active collaborative process of *Stones*.

Focusing on the verbal elements positioned at the center of the image, Perloff argues that the theme of the stone is "heroism and anti-heroism in various guises."²²³ Read together, Rivers's visual images and O'Hara's verbal images say just as much about the variety and intimacy of their shared artistic and personal lives at a particular time, the 1950s, and in a particular place, the United States. "US" displays the literal physical dependence between O'Hara and Rivers in the use of the word "us"; in private references like "G" and "P" (probably Stein and Picasso²²⁴), parties they attended, and "Jane" (Jane Freilicher); in the mirror images on either side, at the top, of O'Hara's face turned to Rivers's face, whose eyes swivel right or left to stare at O'Hara's face; and in the image of O'Hara and Rivers embracing on the bottom right [Figure 14]. The interplay of verbal

²²² Rivers "Life Among the Stones" 94.

²²³ Perloff 102.

²²⁴ Ibid. 103.

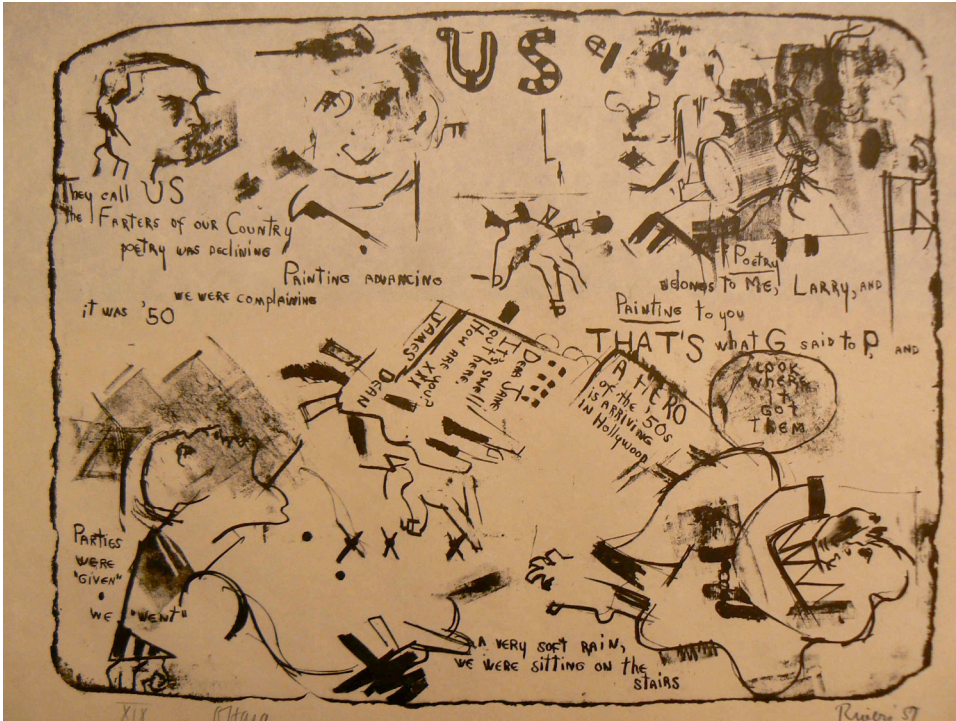


Fig. 14. Tabloidscript one, "US," from *Stones*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

and visual elements materialize the intimacy by blurring the boundaries between words and images. When describing “US,” Rivers admits not remembering whether he or O’Hara wrote the title letters,²²⁵ and in the center of the stone, words scroll onto paper that morphs from a hand, itself hovering as if birthed from the belly of a reclining, sensual O’Hara (identifiable by the broken-nose profile). The ultimate expressions of personal and aesthetic intimacy are clustered on the right: at the top Rivers establishes a scene, his face in close proximity to O’Hara’s, O’Hara drinking from a roughly sketched cup, suggesting a familiar bar scene, where aesthetic debate mingles with personal excess. Below this scene, O’Hara’s words provide an ironic dialogue—“Poetry/ belongs to me, Larry, and/ Painting to you/ That’s what G said to P and/ Look/ where/ it/ got/ them.” Below these lines O’Hara and Rivers lie in an embrace that blends their two bodies, creating two heads but also only two arms, two legs, and two feet. Intruding from the center is a sign that reads “A Hero/ of the ‘50s/ is arriving/ in Hollywood,” which is linked visually to the letter to Jane that is signed “James Dean.” The intrusion of the sign sets up a contrast between the supposed normative masculine associations with James Dean and the non-normative homosexual associations of a physically integrated O’Hara and Rivers. The relationship between Stein and Picasso, a poet and painter who were well known for having influenced each other, and thus all poets and painters who mix and forget their proper domains, is called out as supposedly abnormal in the same way. By mixing these disparate words and images, O’Hara and Rivers link their challenges to aesthetic and sexual norms. Their indictment of these two dominant norms in the 1950s America they have experienced is expressed as camp in most of the stone but is intensified by O’Hara’s words nestled between Rivers’s drawing of O’Hara in ecstasy, on

²²⁵ Rivers, “Life Among the Stones” 94.

the left, and Rivers and O'Hara clutched together, on the right: "A very soft rain,/ we were sitting on the/ stairs." Given the complexity of the political, aesthetic, and sexual relationships explored in "US," the final line seems simple. Serving as a link between sex and love, and expressing a moment of stasis amid chaos, the words speak to the profound comfort that O'Hara and Rivers feel as friends and collaborators, men choosing to sit together to watch the rain.

The sexual, artistic, and political challenge posed by "US" is followed by the less frenetic "Springtemps," which features a chatty poem addressed to Rivers's son Joseph and a crude drawing of an androgynous human bowing down to flowers [Figure 15]. The overt theme is reverence for the arrival of spring with its attendant promise of new life, and it is to that "pregnant moment," to use Lessing's term for the still climax often captured in visual art, that O'Hara and Rivers pose the challenge of their collaboration. While Perloff labels "Springtemps" as one of the less interesting plates in *Stones*, arguing that "neither the picture nor the poem seems to gain much from [their] juxtaposition,"²²⁶ I see this second tabloscript as a more oblique expression of the same argument found in "US." While O'Hara's poem certainly has the appearance of being "self-contained," as Perloff calls it, because it is presented as a personal address, the very referential nature of the poem points to the immediacy of his working relationship with Rivers, which O'Hara equates to "the hive," and the interconnected nature of their personal and artistic lives. Joseph has interrupted their work to bring in "a new pair of flowers," perhaps to remind them of nature's continual movement beyond the door of the workshop, and to share a

²²⁶ Perloff 105.

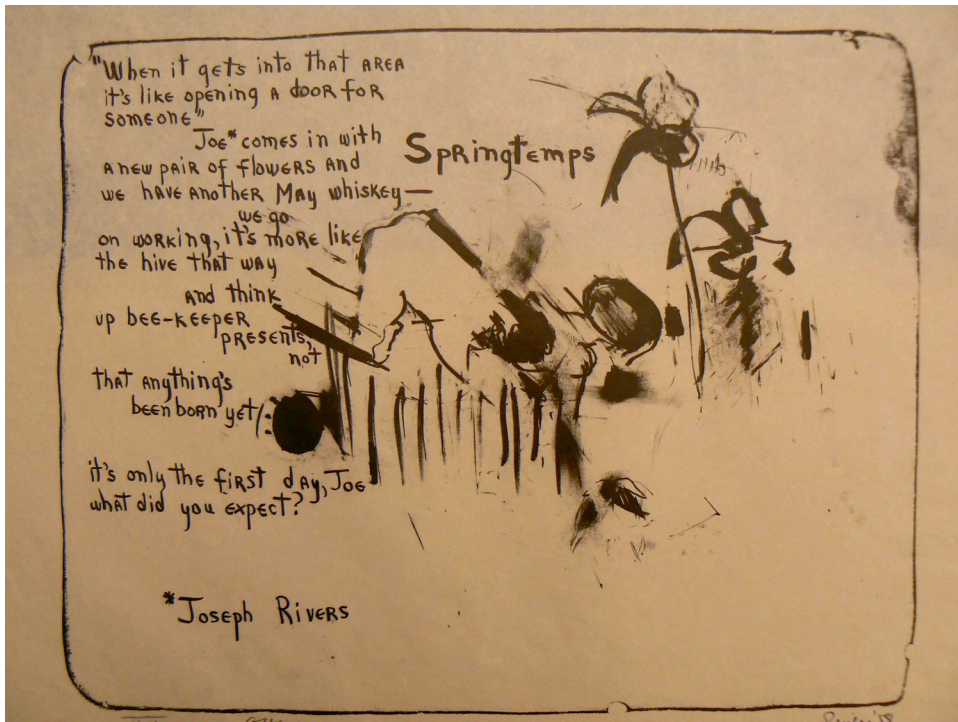


Fig. 15. Tabloscript two, "Springtemps," from *Stones*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

drink of “May whiskey,” but despite this intrusion of life, “we go/ on working, it’s more like/ the hive that way.” The beehive, with all its internal cooperative work, cannot function independent of its surroundings—indeed, the work of the hive is prompted by the fluctuations of the environment just as the collaboration between O’Hara and Rivers is prompted by the interactions of more than just their artistic work. Rivers’s drawing insists on the simultaneity of material and aesthetic motives by accentuating the whole body, the head of which bows before natural bounty and the rear of which offers itself up to accept more of that bounty. The androgyny of the human figure confirms O’Hara and Rivers’s challenge to sexual propriety by being both figurative and allusive—whether male or female, the sexually proffered buttocks literally cannot serve to bear offspring, but Rivers’s flowers and O’Hara’s claim that something will be born, even if it hasn’t “been born yet,” undermine the heteronormative status quo while also boldly contending that their work together will bear new life.

The focus on inseparability is continued in the third tabloscript, “Rimbaud & Verlaine.” In what seems an impossible coincidence, hanging in the studio where O’Hara and Rivers worked on *Stones* was a photograph of the poets Rimbaud and Verlaine whose aesthetics and troubled sexual relationship could be said to resemble that between O’Hara and Rivers. The photograph captured Rivers’s attention, and he started drawing the faces, which prompted him and O’Hara to recall yet another seemingly impossible coincidence:

We then remembered a ballet night at the City Center. During an intermission we were making our way down the wide staircase from the cheap seats to the mezzanine when our mutual friend and my dealer John Myers thinking he was being funny screamed out for general use “there they are all covered with blood

and semen.” This is a reference to something said about Rimbaud and Verlaine that Verlaine’s wife hounded him with for his whole life. After recalling this Frank decided to use it and in a delicate two-line series he began writing.²²⁷

The set of circumstances linking the physical space of the workshop, the aesthetic affinities of O’Hara and Rivers to Symbolist poets, the personal relationship between O’Hara and Rivers, and the personal and professional jealousies they faced, leads to one of the most interesting and pronounced blurring of boundaries in *Stones*. Nowhere on the plate is the title “Rimbaud & Verlaine” written; instead, the title is verbalized by Rivers’s drawing of Rimbaud and Verlaine at the top of the plate [Figure 16].²²⁸ Word and image continue to “bleed” into each other with O’Hara’s use of words as physical embodiments of material relationships. He condenses the complex sexual relationship between Rimbaud and Verlaine to the exchange of blood (existence reduced to “a pint of blood on a/ windowsill—”), itself a reference to Verlaine’s shooting of Rimbaud, and further reduces that exchange to literal bullets that “arrive as beats/ of the corps de ballet.” Rivers’s failed drawing of a leg descending a staircase on the bottom right—as he reports, “I tried a staircase...no good”²²⁹—evolves into “bullets that were also penises with legs”²³⁰ that shoot out from the staircase back toward the gun from which,

²²⁷ Rivers, “Life Among the Stones” 94.

²²⁸ Other tabloscripts from *Stones* do not have obvious titles, either, but this is the only one where the originating subject/title is so overtly figured by the image. Other tabloscripts that lack a verbalized title are number six, on which the poem is titled “Students” but which Rivers in “Life Among the Stones” calls the music plate; number eleven, whose central image appears to be O’Hara himself; and number twelve, which has neither a verbal nor a visual focal point. The MOMA catalogue titles these tabloscripts with the first line of the poem, which is how I will refer to them in subsequent discussion.

²²⁹ Ibid. 94.

²³⁰ Ibid. 94.

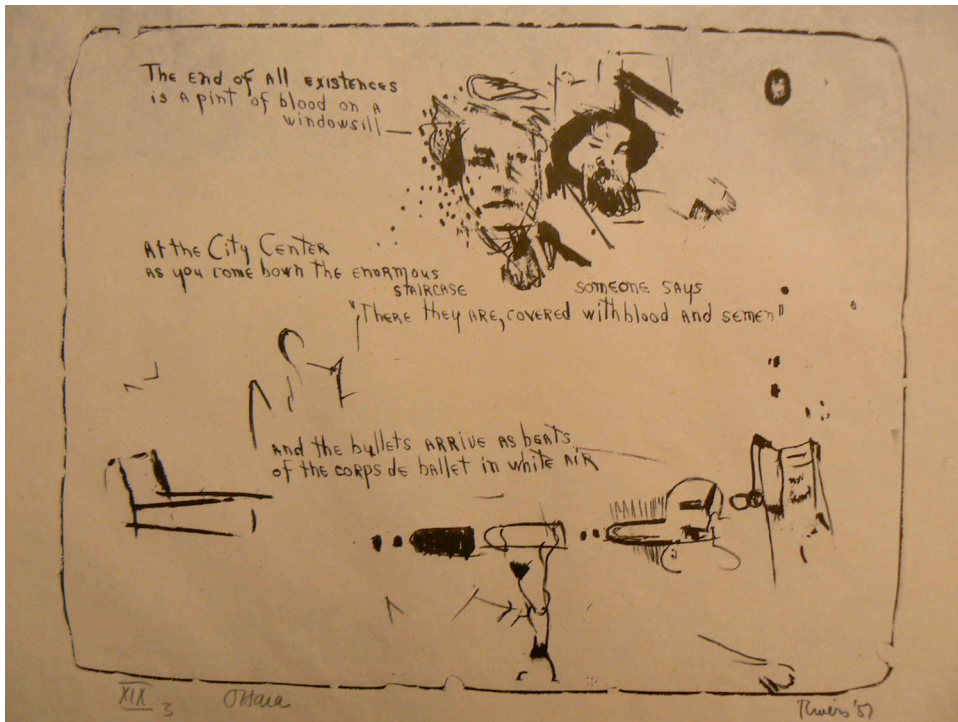


Fig. 16. Tabloscript three, "Rimbaud & Verlaine," from *Stones*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

presumably, they originated. Like the trajectory of the bullets, the gun is backwards, turned upside down and facing the bullets to receive them back into its barrel. This insistent disruption of the natural order of things links back to O'Hara's verbalized connection between literal bullets and language. What Perloff calls "Myers's snide remark"²³¹ is figured by O'Hara as physical insults hurled by the synchronized, staged dancing of the corps de ballet. The programmatic beating of their feet correlates to the aesthetic and personal jealousies that O'Hara and Rivers challenge in "US" and "Springtemps" and that motivated Myers's comment. Rivers's bullet/penises confirm the inseparability of attacks on homosexuality and attacks on collaborative art. Though fraught with this political commentary, the leggy penises also make "Rimbaud & Verlaine" playful. Rivers saw his drawing as "Simple Simon's response to what Frank had written about the corps de ballet. If there is 'art' somewhere in this lithograph its presence remains a mystery."²³² I would argue that this mysterious art is a product of being in the moment—though on the surface, Rivers's images may indeed seem a simple response to O'Hara's words, both are responding to a complex of real and symbolic relations expressed through a fundamentally destabilized boundary between word and image.

Together these first three tabloscripts of *Stones* establish a varying pattern of emphasis on the mingling of personal and aesthetic space, embodied in the blurring of media boundaries, that is explored, more and less successfully, in the remaining nine plates. In her discussion of *Stones* Perloff identifies those less successful plates either by labeling them as less interesting or by omitting them from discussion. She focuses on the

²³¹ Perloff 104.

²³² Rivers, "Life Among the Stones" 94.

success of “US,” “Rimbaud & Verlaine,” “Love” (tabloscript four), and “Melancholy Breakfast” (tabloscript eight), while seeing little of interest in “Springtemps” and condemning “Music” as not, in fact, collaborative.²³³ According to Rivers, “Music” was “a little more old-fashioned: our unintegrated style.”²³⁴ The chief cause of the “unintegrated” nature of the plate was a change in their usual collaborative method. As Rivers recounts, “Frank decided he wanted to write something first and see how I would respond. He wrote it on paper and when it got to the stone its shape changed. He had to arrange it all somewhere in the bottom third of the stone. I read it through... It was hard to see exactly how I might use it to take care of my two-thirds.”²³⁵ Rivers’s separation of space belonging to O’Hara and space belonging to him is telling of just how unintegrated “Music” is—not only did O’Hara and Rivers not work simultaneously but they reverted to established boundaries between word and image. “Music” stands out as disruptive to the collaboration whether viewers know the story of its creation or not. Word and image do not mix spatially, verbally, or symbolically, and there is an overt disjunction between the precise figurative imagery in O’Hara’s poem and the total abstraction of Rivers’s drawing, which according to him is his “own version of Batman. Violinman”²³⁶ [Figure 17]. Perloff argues that “Music” doesn’t work because the poem was inscribed on the stone as “a finished product, a condition which leaves the painter with no role but that of

²³³ Perloff 102-105.

²³⁴ Rivers, “Life Among the Stones” 96.

²³⁵ Ibid. 96.

²³⁶ Ibid. 96.

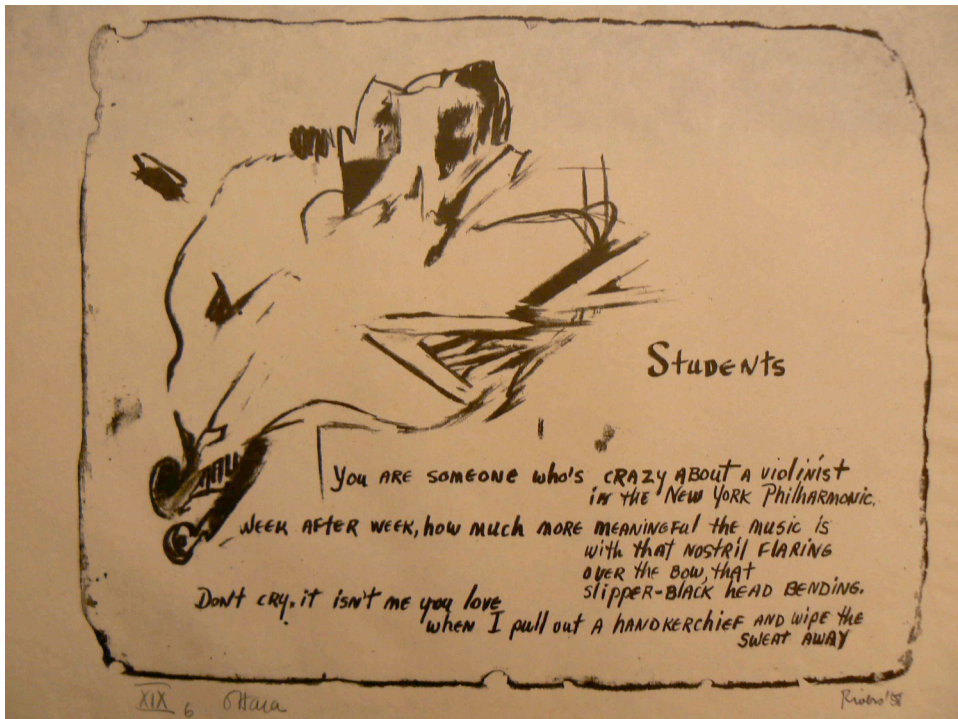


Fig. 17. Tabloscript six, "Music," from *Stones*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

illustrator. True artistic collaborations must, however, involve simultaneity.”²³⁷ I hope that my discussions of *Capriccio* and *One Big Self* show that simultaneity is not a precondition of all true artistic collaborations, but here I agree with Perloff that “Music” reveals the absolutely necessary role physical and material interaction between poet and painter plays in the collaboration between O’Hara and Rivers. “Music” is a success insofar as it highlights the importance of the working relationship that produced the integrated plates in *Stones*.

“Love” and “Melancholy Breakfast,” two of the tabloscripts Perloff focuses on most, along with “Energy” and “Five O’Clock,” lean more overtly toward the exploration of aesthetic space, while “Berdie,” “To the Entertainment of Patsy and Mile Goldberg,” “Where Are They,” and “Pittsburgh Carnegie” (none of which Perloff discusses) deal with personal space. Perloff writes persuasively that “Love” contains “a strange tension between the verbal (‘pretty’ images, rhymes, sonorous vowel sounds) and the visual (broad-shouldered supermen, giant genitalia, a top hat)”²³⁸ [Figure 18], which, to extend her point, argues against the codification of macho masculinity and the rigid boundaries between word and image. Similarly, “Melancholy Breakfast” uses surrealistic shifts to mingle word and image, personal and aesthetic. Time distorts space—at breakfast everything is “blue overhead blue underneath” because “The elements of disbelief are very strong in the morning” and the half-solid table is hurriedly scratched out—and semi-abstract images are given form by being personified—“the silent egg thinks/ and the toaster’s electrical/ ear waits” [Figure 19]. “Five O’Clock” also operates by mixing verbal symbols and visual signs (a state of being becomes a numeral; the signs for male

²³⁷ Perloff 105.

²³⁸ Ibid. 105.

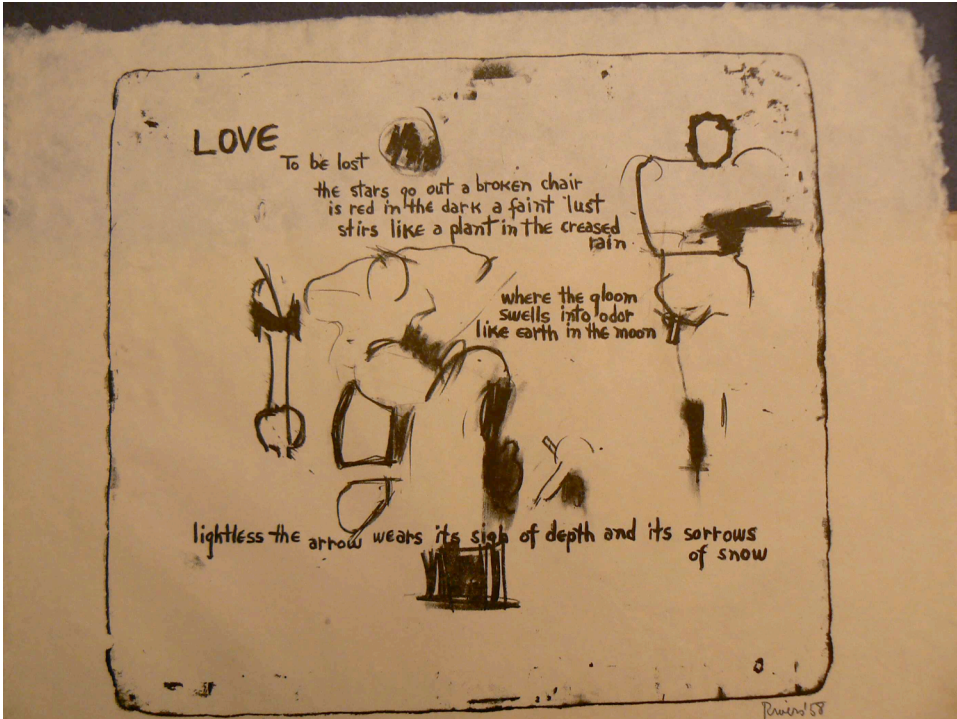


Fig. 18. Tabloscript four, "Love," from *Stones*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

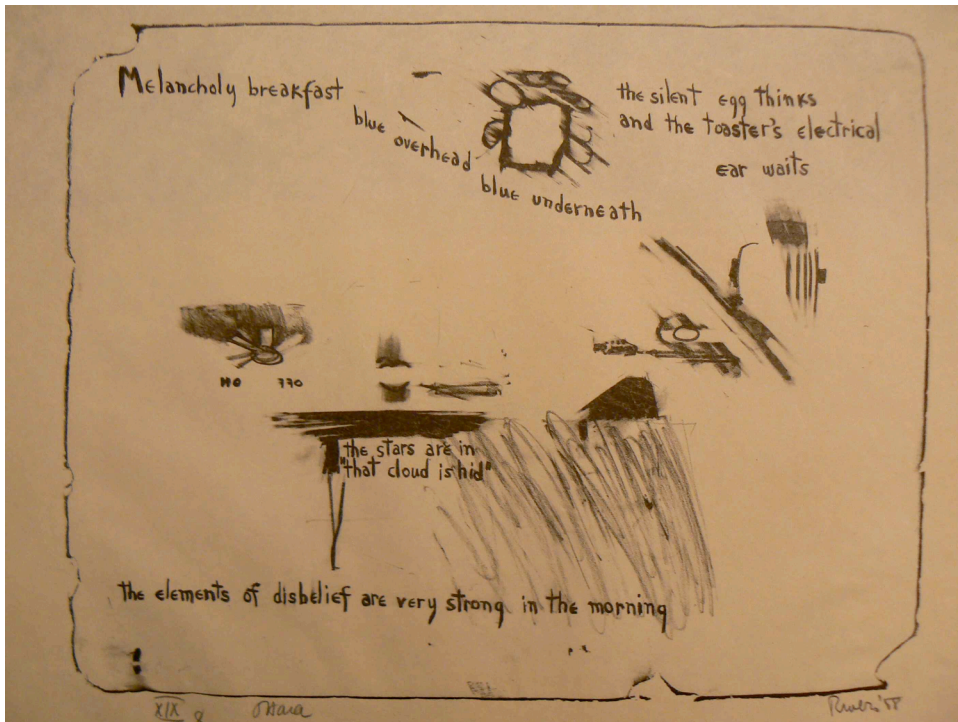


Fig. 19. Tabloscript eight, "Melancholy Breakfast," from *Stones*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

and female delineate an exchange between voices in the poem), but “Energy” is almost wholly focused on words. The title is written in gestural strokes, with a star roughed in above the “n,” and the only other images are an atom blurred into motion at bottom right and what appears to be a miniature space satellite in between the first and second stanzas of the poem [Figure 20]. The first line of the second stanza is interrupted by a smeared, curved line that seems to mimic the shape of the “r” in the word “red” that follows it, but that might also be an artefact that Rivers could not erase. Either way, the absence of visual images in “Energy,” relative to their presence in the other tabloscripts, calls attention to the ways in which action can be embodied in writing as much as in painting. In “Life Among the Stones” Rivers points out that during the process of collaborating together, he and O’Hara came to realize that O’Hara “with his limited means was almost as important as myself in the overall visual force of the print... Besides what they seemed to mean he was using his words as a visual element. The size of his letters, the density of the color brought on by how hard or softly he pressed on the crayon, where it went of the stone (which many times was left up to him) were not things that remained separated from my scratches and smudges.”²³⁹ The visual “r” and the verbal “r” cannot be separated in “Energy.”

Of the four tabloscripts that emphasize the inseparability of their personal space from their aesthetic lives, two focus on their intimate world and two on their social world. “Berdie” and “Where Are They” both link the shared day-to-day with artistic motivation by reconfiguring the still image as active. In both, Rivers’ drawings are portraits, the former of his mother-in-law and the latter of O’Hara. According to art critic Sam Hunter,

²³⁹ Rivers, “Life Among the Stones” 94-96.

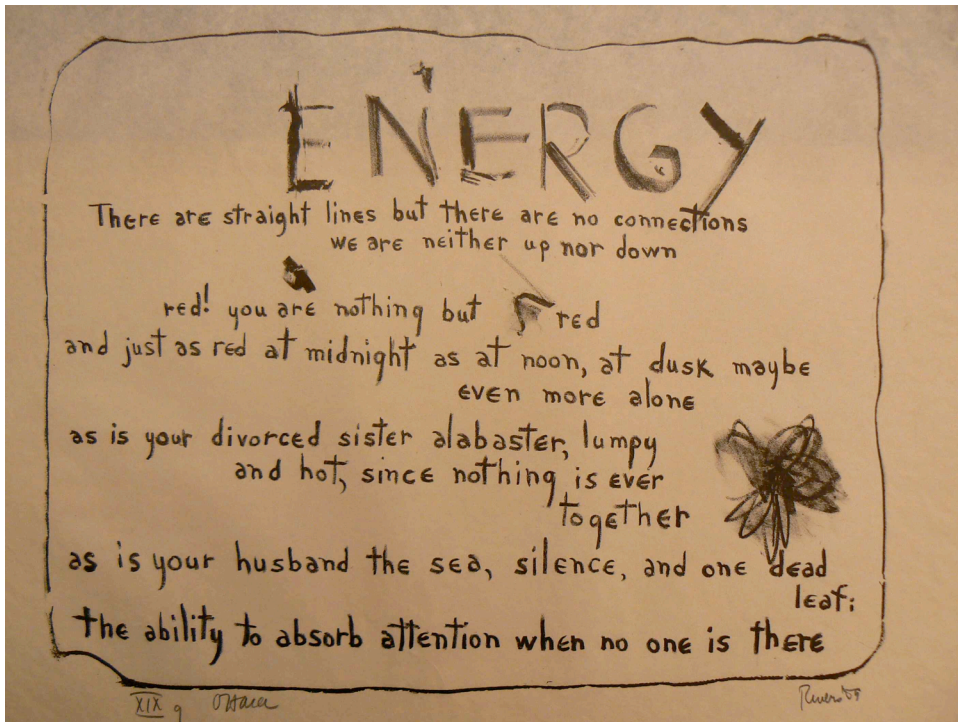


Fig. 20. Tabloscript nine, "Energy," from *Stones*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

“In the middle fifties Rivers gained a deserved reputation as America’s most gifted young portraitist, one of the rare artists who combined interest in the human personality with an authentic personal style.”²⁴⁰ For Rivers, portraiture was the way into his “mature style,” a style that revealed his dedication to both action painting and the personal. Hunter argues that the work Rivers did on the 1953 *Portrait of Berdie* allowed him to achieve a balance between abstraction and the abstract figuration he admired in Willem de Kooning: “Out of a welter of sensitive scribbles and color zones, he built an emergent kind of image with a blurry human recognizability—the sum of accident, erasures, gestural marks, and alternately description and disembodied contours, like so much of Action Painting.”²⁴¹ That Berdie figures as the subject of her own tabloscript in *Stones* is no surprise, given her interconnectedness to the personal and artistic lives of Rivers and O’Hara. Berdie lived with Rivers and his two sons, caring for the household, including O’Hara on his frequent visits, until her death. She was one of Rivers’s most frequent subjects and featured in several of O’Hara’s poems. In “Larry Rivers: A Memoir” O’Hara remembers her as “a woman of infinite patience and sweetness, who held together a Bohemian household of such staggering complexity it would have driven a less great woman mad.”²⁴² O’Hara also makes clear that Berdie’s importance was more than domestic: “I mention these details of Rivers’ life because, in the sense that Picasso meant it, his work

²⁴⁰ Sam Hunter, “Larry Rivers,” *Rivers* (New York: Abrams, 1971) 22.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.* 16.

²⁴² O’Hara, “Larry Rivers: A Memoir” 171.

is very much a diary of his experience. He is inspired directly by visual stimulation and his work is ambitious to save these experiences.”²⁴³

Both “Berdie” and “Where Are They” take on as subject intimate personal experience as it is linked to artistic endeavor. In “Berdie,” O’Hara, who uses “we” to speak for both himself and Rivers, rejoices in the fact that Berdie’s image appears, thanks to Rivers, in “so many museums.” Her still image, the portrait, serves as a mechanism to trigger memory and allows them a moment “out of traffic/ as if we were talking/ in the dirty light/ of loss.” O’Hara’s poem is addressed to Berdie, beginning, “How lucky we are that you’re/ in so many museums,” which seems at first to establish a sentimental longing for the object/subject, the consequence, as James Heffernan reminds us, of the function of the museum: “While the art historian may elaborately contextualize a work of art, the museum individuates it *for the eye*, sets it off for contemplation or veneration in its own framed and labeled space, presents it to us as a self-sufficient icon.”²⁴⁴ The action against such inert nostalgia is the constant friction exerted by “loss.” The “we” of the poem sees Berdie through loss, which is necessarily disfiguring because it is “dirty,” and Rivers’s almost wholly abstract, though still recognizably figural, drawing of Berdie, around and onto which O’Hara has written his poem, is itself actively effaced by thick black lines around the head, obscuring the face (that area of the body that is most often identifiable in portraiture) and by translucent black lines over the title—the name—the most intimate signifier [Figure 21]. In the second stanza of the poem, O’Hara confronts the tendency to make an icon out of individual works of art by declaring, “it is not the Parthenon/ but a Vuillard small/ as an Adam’s apple/ where pain mounts and falls.”

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 138.

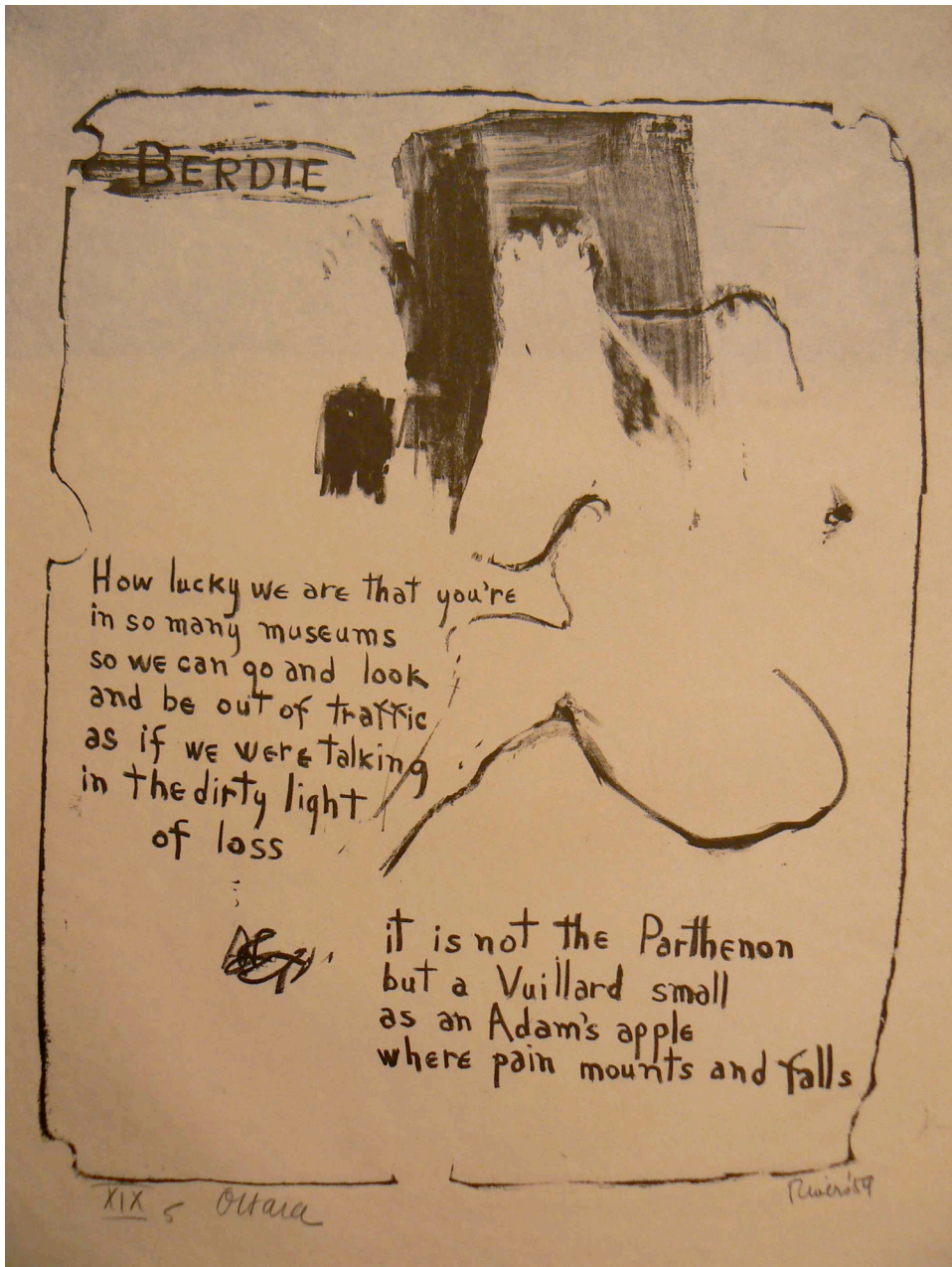


Fig. 21. Tabloscript five, “Berdie,” from *Stones*. Courtesy of Emory University’s Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

Rather than being an object to worship, the subject becomes an action as intimate and personal as swallowing to relieve an accumulation of emotion.

Just as “Berdie” explores the action possible in viewing the still image, so does “Where Are They” explore the action possible in reading still words. The first two lines of the poem—“Where are they/ whose hands”—come from Swinburne’s *The Tale of Balen*. In that poem, the lines are spoken by King Arthur who asks Merlin what has happened to the brothers Balen and Balan, two of his knights. Swinburne’s poem is a ballad of filial love, which may have something to do with O’Hara’s appropriation of his words since the bond between two men is also at the center of *Stones*. In O’Hara’s poem, the still act of reading, shown in Rivers’s seated man whose head bows over a book, is figured as active by the hands of those who “turned pages in elusive/ dog-ears threw it/ on the floor” [Figure 22]. The book is both a used and useless object to be discarded. Discarding the book, similarly to viewing the still image of Berdie through loss, allows the “they,” those who have read the book and left their mark on it, to come alive—“Up from/ the floor they come/ in black to act.” The action of readers takes the form of further destruction, since “they” become like “book-worms devouring/ all but the trace/ of what we read.” The act of reading is figured as an act of annihilating the object in order to absorb “the trace/ of what we read.” As the visual image of Berdie is effaced to produce the action of viewing, so here is the verbal effaced to produce the action of reading. Together, “Berdie” and “Who Are They” argue for the gestural and occasional as the common motivator and common core of verbal and visual art.

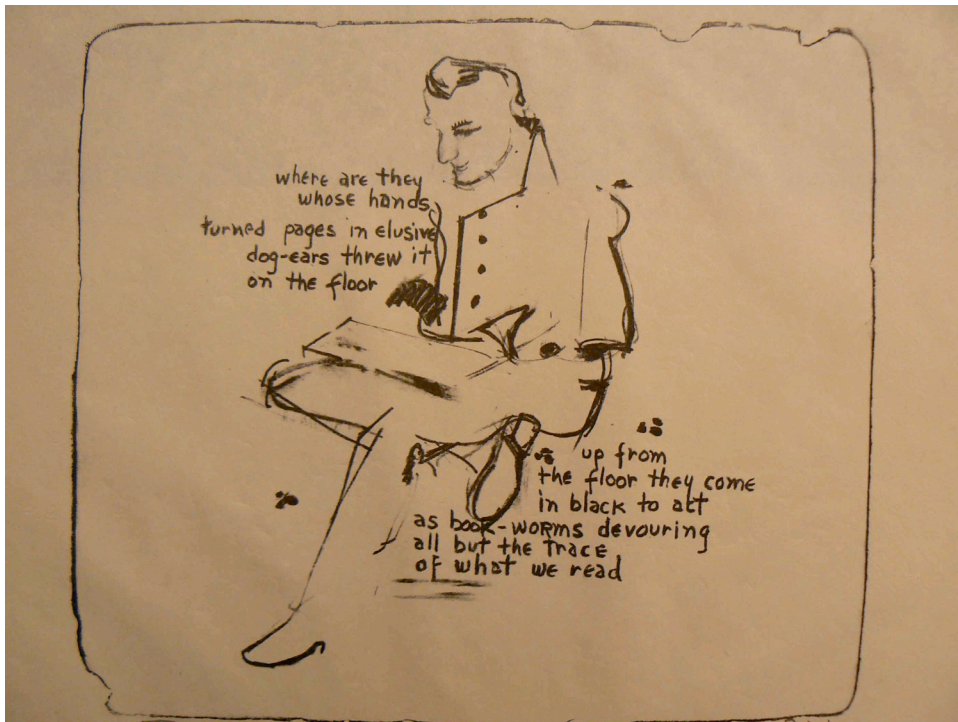


Fig. 22. Tabloscript eleven, "Where Are They," from *Stones*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

The intersection of O'Hara and Rivers's social and aesthetic worlds is also represented as dependent on the occasion in "To the Entertainment of Patsy and Mike Goldberg" and "Will We Ever." The first celebrates the marriage of writer Patsy Southgate and artist Mike Goldberg while the second takes as its subject a seemingly more mundane event, a road trip to the Pittsburgh Carnegie Museum. The seeming disparity between the gravity of the two occasions confirms the belief of O'Hara and Rivers that any occasion is suitable to be art. Both tabloscripts draw on aspects of popular culture that would soon become mainstays of Pop Art, a movement at which O'Hara and Rivers were at the fore. The comic book style in which the verbal and visual elements are integrated in "To the Entertainment of Patsy and Mike Goldberg" [Figure 23] acts as a kind of improvisational breaking of style, which is both abrupt and liberating, since it follows the "unintegrated" tabloscript "Music." While this celebration of marriage is not as richly layered as other tabloscripts, it serves as a necessary disruption that allows the action of collaboration to continue evolving. As the last tabloscript, "Will We Ever" serves as a campy commentary on O'Hara and Rivers's place in the art world. The presiding question, "Will we ever get to the Pittsburgh Carnegie," has the dual purpose of locating the poem in a specific place and time, a road trip to a museum, and of locating the artistic work of O'Hara and Rivers—along with their friends poet Diana di Prima and artists Grace Hartigan and Alfred Leslie—within the larger art world. So the question is pedestrian and monumental and directly links the personal and aesthetic. A road trip with friends, complete with billboard and highway sign, stands as an aesthetic journey to mix with the greats of the day, artist Masson and art critics Venturi and Hess [Figure 24]. Whether they reach this destination is irrelevant—the focus is on the moment and the art



Fig. 23. Tabloscript seven, "To the Entertainment of Patsy and Mike Goldberg," from *Stones*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

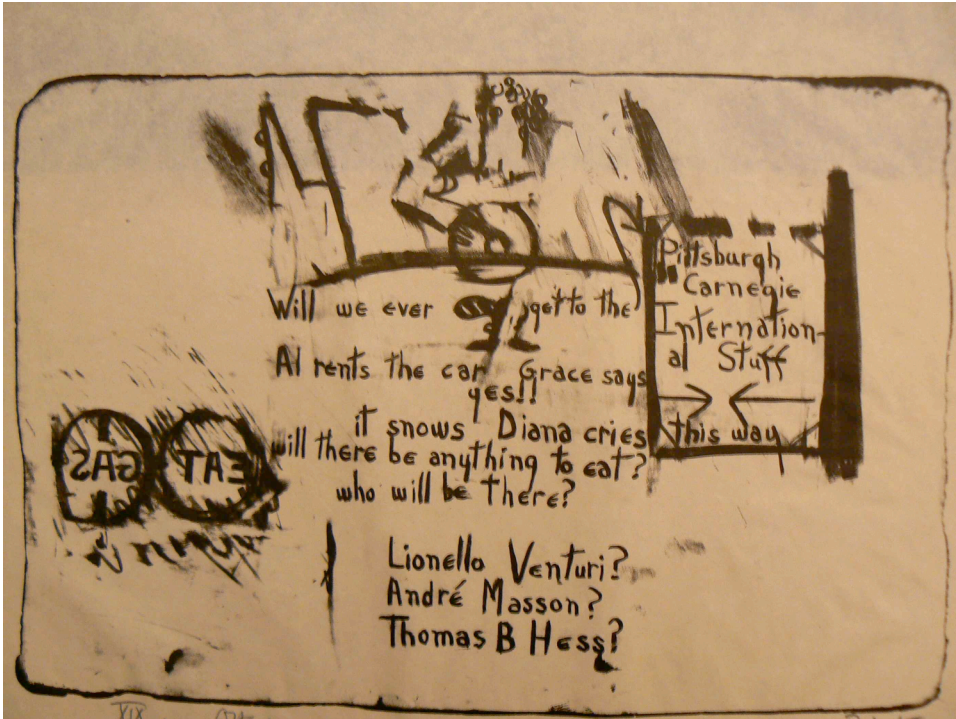


Fig. 24. Tabloscript twelve, "Will We Ever," from *Stones*. Courtesy of Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

is in being present in the moment. The combination of Rivers's billboard on the left and highway sign on the right with O'Hara's lines of poetry traveling in between creates the sense of driving in the car, seeing the sights as they flash by and listening to the mundane but pertinent questions of friends ("will there be anything to eat?/ who will be there?"). By ending on this most active of tabloscripts O'Hara and Rivers intensify the feeling of spontaneity with which they began *Stones*.

Conclusion

The journey, then, the process, the action, the discovery—these are the forces that drive *Stones*. By insisting that the journey is communal, O'Hara and Rivers thumbed their noses at propriety, and by making the process of collaboration inseparable from the material product of collaboration, they broke new artistic ground and made way for future collaborators like Hughes and Baskin and Wright and Luster to explore other ways to engage in verbal-visual collaboration. The completeness with which O'Hara and Rivers integrated their personalities and their art results in a collaboration that does indeed fuse poetry and art. The beauty of the collaboration is that it is not always possible, nor even desirable, to know whose hand wrote "US."

Chapter Three
Writing with Light: C. D. Wright and Deborah Luster in Partnership Collaboration
on *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*

Introduction: The Book

Midway through her book-length poem, “One Big Self,” C.D. Wright inserts a letter:

Dear Prisoner,

I too love. Faces. Hands. The circumference
Of the oaks. I confess. To nothing
You could use. In a court of law. I found.
That sickly sweet ambrosia of hope. Unmendable
Seine of sadness. Experience taken away.
From you. I would open. The mystery
Of your birth. To you. I know. We can
Change. Knowing. Full well. Knowing.

It is not enough.

Poetry Time Space Death

I thought. I could write. An exculpatory note.
I cannot. Yes, it is bitter. Every bit of it, bitter.
The course taken by blood. All thinking
Deceives us. Lead (kindly) light.
Notwithstanding this grave. Your garden.
This cell. Your dwelling. Who is unaccountably free.

No one promised you the light or the morrow²⁴⁵

Wright's letter reveals frustration in the face of the task of writing about prisoners, the subject she and Deborah Luster took on in their collaboration *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*. Wright begins her letter by detailing what she has in common with prisoners—love. She sympathizes with their position, having no recourse to justice, no chance to live a full life, and then she discloses what she hopes to accomplish with her poem—to unlock the prisoners from the circumstances of their lives, to change the way they see the world and the way the world sees them. Within the last line of the first part of the letter, Wright embeds the crux of her frustration with her task—the difficulty of negotiating the dual, contradictory facets of “knowledge.” Her first use of this word is hopeful—she *knows* she can effect a change, make a difference. Her second use of “knowledge,” though, ringed as it is by the words “full well” and “it is not enough,” show that Wright is aware both that her initial knowledge is incomplete and that any knowledge she might impart will have little effect on the situation of her subjects. In the second half of her letter, Wright confesses to the naiveté that informed her first knowledge—she thought she could write a poem that would exculpate the prisoners, but she cannot. Her poem addresses the deceptive qualities of knowledge—or more accurately, of the ways in which we seek to know others.

One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana is a verbal-visual collaboration between poet C.D. Wright and photographer Deborah Luster that was published in 2003 by Twin Palms Publishers, a small press out of Santa Fe, New Mexico, which publishes books of art and photography. The book's appearance is consistent with an art book. Measuring 11

²⁴⁵ C. D. Wright, “One Big Self,” *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* (New Mexico: Twin Palms Press, 2003).

½ inches wide and 12 and ¾ inches tall, the book weighs nearly five pounds and is thus not a text one settles in to read in bed. Coming upon it on a bookstore shelf, one might not even recognize it as a text to be “read.” Though not as unwieldy as either *Capriccio* or *Stones*, the size and weight of *One Big Self* and the spare design details on the covers and spine contribute to the sense that this is a book of art to be viewed at leisure. The dust jacket is black, and the title appears in white on the front and again on the spine where it is accompanied by the somewhat enigmatic line “Deborah Luster + C.D. Wright.” This line is the most obvious indication that the book contains material by more than one person, but the title design also makes that suggestion. The first half of the title, “One Big Self,” is printed in a serif typeface that resembles a typewriter font, and it is printed one word over the next, slightly left of center and raised above the second half of the title [Figure 25]. “Prisoners of Louisiana” is set in a sans-serif typeface that appears larger, bolder, and plainer than the serif typeface to the left. Juxtaposed, the two typefaces exaggerate each other’s qualities—“One Big Self” seems elegant, romantic, while “Prisoners of Louisiana” is stark and visually dominant. The inclusion on the dust jacket of two “author” names and the visual schism between the two halves of the title provide the barest suggestion that this book is, in fact, a collaboration. On the back cover, a single photograph is suspended in the black field—only a faint line of light demarcates the black ground of the photograph. In the black box of the cover, in the black box of the photograph, sits a man whose back is turned. His pants rest low, revealing checkered boxers, and he wears no shirt, showing off an elaborate tattoo on his upper back that reads “REAL” in vaguely gothic print [Figure 25]. What is inside this book? If the

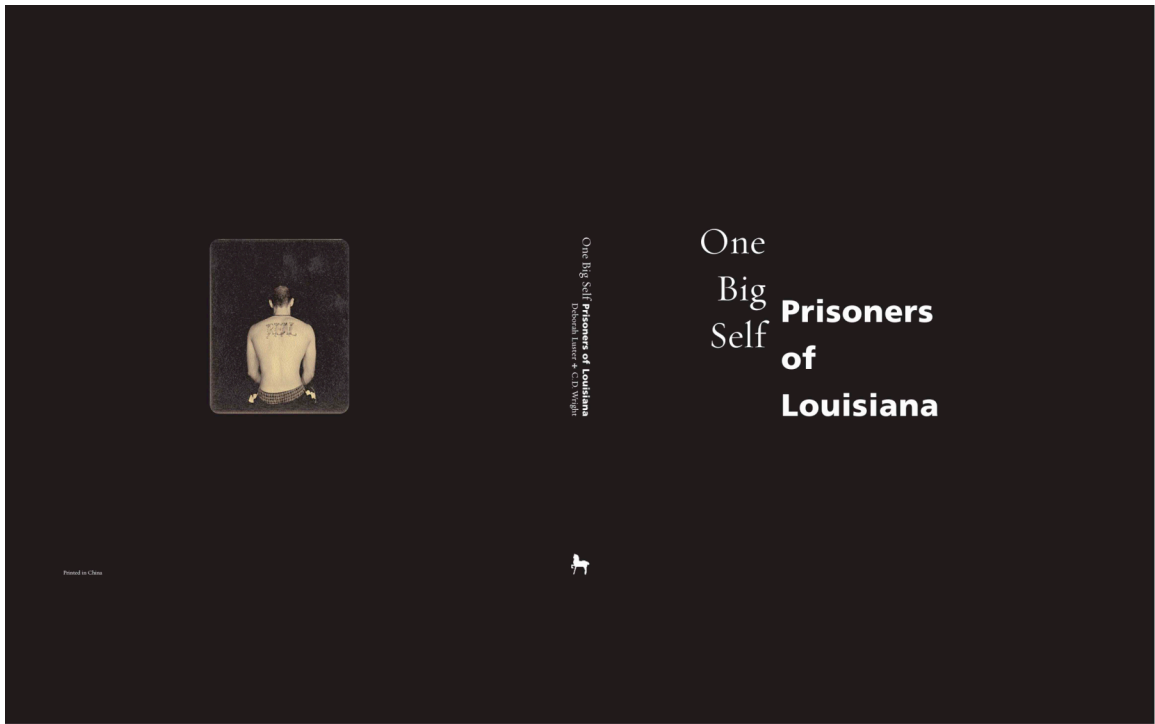


Fig. 25. Dust Jacket from *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*. Courtesy of Twin Palms Press.

ambiguous front cover and spine are not enough to entice readers, this seated man, looking inward, promises something real when we open the covers.

The first eight pages of the book seem to confirm an initial impression that this book is meant to showcase art. On seven of these eight pages are two photographs, placed side by side, accompanied by brief titles that “identify” the subject of the photograph (the first page of the book contains only one photograph). The titles always include a place name—“Transylvania, Louisiana,” “Angola, Louisiana,” or “St. Gabriel, Louisiana.” Because the book’s title delineates, in part, the book’s “subject” as prisoners from Louisiana, it is not difficult to recognize that the photographs’ titles provide information on where the person in the photograph is imprisoned. But some titles also include a name, or a nickname in quotation marks, that precedes the place name. Why some of the prisoners are “identified” more specifically is a question not addressed in the book until the end. As my integrated reading will show, *One Big Self* is more than just a socially aware presentation of prisoners but is designed to engage readers in questions about how we come to know others.

In a similar design decision, explanation of a far more cryptic set of identifying facts supplied with each photograph is left until the book’s end. Printed approximately one inch below and aligned with the right edge of each photograph are short lines of text, varying from as many as ten lines to as few as six. These short lines are arranged so that they suggest a rectangular shape that reflects the shape of the photograph above and might most commonly be called a caption [Figure 26]. The first line always begins with the letters “doc” followed by the number sign and a series of numbers. The numbers are surely meant to “identify” the prisoners, but in what way? The lines that follow—“dob. 9.

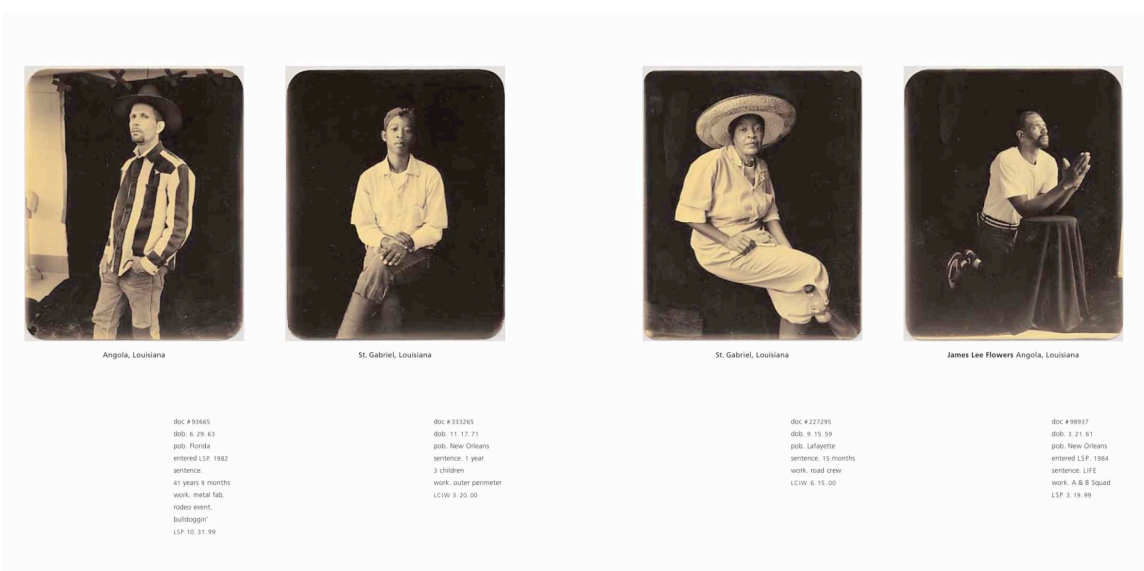


Fig. 26. Spread Two from *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*. Courtesy of Twin Palms Press.

15. 59” and “pob. Lafayette”—contain more familiar abbreviations, but the question remains as to the value of this information. Some of the blocks of short text continue on to provide information on when the prisoner “entered LSP. 1984” and/or on the prisoner’s “sentence. LIFE.” Some contain a line like “3 children”; most indicate “work.” followed by any number of possible professions. In some we find seemingly random bits of information: a line that reads, “bulldoggin” or another set of three that reads, “tattoo. *Naughty/by Nature/Born Killer.*” Finally, the last line is always another set of cryptic letters—“ECPPF,” “LSP,” or “LCIW”—followed by a date. What is meant by this information? It may seem obvious that it is all meant to help the reader identify the subject of the photograph—how old she is, where she was born, how many children she has, what her profession is, perhaps even her number in the correctional system. But why and how is the information useful? The import of this method of identification that seems, in fact, to fly in the face of identification will be explored later. For now, it is important to note that the reader is immediately faced with a book that simultaneously pictures and obscures its subject matter.

A reader unsettled by uncertainty might begin flipping through the book. She will notice that it contains more text than is present in the first eight pages. Page eleven begins a four-page essay by Deborah Luster. Page sixteen begins a book-length poem by C.D. Wright entitled “One Big Self.” Subsequent spreads follow one of three possible designs: one page each of poem text and two photographs, two pages each with two photographs, or two pages each with poem text. The book’s minimal title page (the ninth page) is sufficient to clarify that “One Big Self” constitutes the book’s text, written by C.D. Wright, though the “text” is not identified as a poem, and that “Prisoners of Louisiana”

constitutes the book's art, "Photographs + Deborah Luster." The facts that the poem "One Big Self" does not begin until the book's sixteenth page, that there is plenty of "text" prior to the beginning of the poem, and that the "text" identified as C.D. Wright's is not explicitly identified as a poem, all combine to confound the reader. Adding to the confusion is the absence of page numbers. What kind of book is this, the apparatus of which seems less to equip the reader for reading the book than deliberately to complicate reading?

The division between the portraits and the poetry is most *visible* in the decision to use a serif typeface for the poetry and a sans-serif typeface for the titles and captions. Just as the use of one serif font and one sans-serif font on the book's cover suggests a separation between two parts of the book ("One Big Self" is visually separated from "Prisoners of Louisiana"), the two different typefaces for the poem and information text (both the titles and the captions) suggest different functions for the two texts. The typeface used for the information text is Frutiger, a typeface designed by Adrian Frutiger for Charles de Gaulle airport and created so that each individual character is quickly and easily recognized, even from a distance, which underscores the information text as "information" rather than artistic representation. The typeface used for the poem is Requiem (perhaps a nod to the prisoners, who Luster calls "the disappeared"), a typeface designed by Jonathan Hoefler and Tobias Frere-Jones and inspired by a set of inscriptional capitals in Ludovico Vicentino degli Arrighi's 1523 writing manual, *Il Modo de Temperare le Penne*, which underscores the poem text as "art" rather than information. The typographical design serves to separate the poem text and the information text, and such division suggests that the content of the two texts is not only

different but also independent. Ultimately, though, the information text and the poem serve as different types of representation, rather than vehicles for distinct, independent content, meant to work in conversation with the photographs. Recognizing that the two types of text serve different representational functions is important for finding equilibrium in this book—the book argues that no one kind of representation has a fundamental claim to accurately representing identity.

The legend provides clues to decoding some of the book's information text. The industrious reader will find it on spread eighty-five. Abbreviations are explained: ECPPF, LCIW, and LSP refer to the three prisons in Louisiana where Deborah Luster photographed—"East Carroll Parish Prison Farm (Transylvania, Louisiana) minimum security for men," "Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women (St. Gabriel, Louisiana) minimum, medium, and maximum security for women," and "Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola, Louisiana) maximum security for men." The "doc" number is the Department of Corrections number. Work information indicates current prison work assignment. The date included in the last line of the caption is the date on which the photograph was taken. The legend also explains the reason for the variety of information printed for each prisoner:

The larger inmate populations of the LSP and LCIW allow for a greater variety of work, skill-training, activities, and organizations. Future Plans were most often provided at the ECPPF because the terms are short enough to imagine a future beyond incarceration. The lines in italics describe the wording of tattoos...A few of the inmates requested their names be withheld, and some provided only their nicknames. The men photographed in large stripes are participants in the annual

rodeo at Angola. In Louisiana, both Halloween and Mardi Gras are celebrated in extravagantly imaginative ways at the LCIW, which is why a number of the women have posed in costume.

Note: The variation in the kind of information given is due in part to the sheer press of circumstances during the photo sessions, and in part due to particular notations or omissions by the inmates. Also, the forms provided inmates were somewhat different in makeup from institution to institution, which is why the women generally listed the number of children they had, and the men only occasionally noted children.

The information provided by the inmates is etched on the backs of the original metal photographic plates.²⁴⁶

More important than why Luster and Wright gave out different forms for prisoners to fill out at different prisons (and that prisoners then decided which questions on those forms to answer) is why they have chosen to print that information in the book. The legend can help the reader to parse the information text, but it does not attempt to decipher the value of that information. In one case, the legend actually raises more questions than it answers—namely in its reference to the rodeo outfits and costumes worn by many of the prisoners in their photographs. A quick check of dates reveals, for example, that all of the photographs of women in Halloween costume were taken on October 27. Did Luster ask the women to pose in their Halloween costumes, or did the women choose to put on their costumes early for Luster? The answer can be found in Luster's opening essay, in which

²⁴⁶ Deborah Luster and C. D. Wright, "Legend," *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* (New Mexico: Twin Palms Press, 2003).

she indicates that she allowed each prisoner to pose “as they presented their very own selves.”²⁴⁷

Clearly, the reader must proactively confront the challenges posed by the photographs, the different kinds of text in the book, and the design features that put them into conversation. Not only does the design exploit the dynamic possibilities of the page, but it also underscores the collaboration between poet and photographer, calling attention to the necessity of “integrated reading.” *One Big Self* is a book that questions our modes of classification and our methods of acquiring knowledge. Luster and Wright argue that identity cannot be imposed (by an artist or by an individual), that it is neither fixed by circumstance nor ever fully resolvable. Their collaboration works against the impulse to classify—the photographs and poem form a reflexive correspondence within a design scheme that refuses any fixed relationship between word and image, placing value, instead, on the search for connections. The final product, the book, is no more important than the process of collaboration itself, and within the book, the process of making and uncovering connections becomes as important, if not more so, than establishing identities for individual prisoners. By choosing to represent prisoners, arguably one of the most unacknowledged and misunderstood populations in America, Luster and Wright argue that acquiring knowledge and understanding of others requires a process that simultaneously exposes the compulsion to fix identity and confirms the necessity of uncovering/discovering the connections that bind us.

²⁴⁷ Deborah Luster, “The Reappearance of Those Who Have Gone” *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* (New Mexico: Twin Palms Press, 2003).

Partnership Collaboration: The Process

In 1998, Deborah Luster was one of a group of photographers funded by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities to document the state's northeast parishes. As she was driving the rural roads, looking for inspiration, she came upon a small prison and thought to herself, "Maybe this is where the people live."²⁴⁸ The prison, East Carroll Parish Prison Farm (or Transylvania), became the first of three prisons where Luster would photograph portraits of inmates. Deborah Luster and C.D. Wright had worked on and off together for ten years, but when Luster asked Wright to join her on this project, Wright was "reluctant at first."²⁴⁹ In the face of Wright's hesitancy, Luster asked simply that she visit the prisons with her. Wright did, and after her first visits, she was "hooked."²⁵⁰

Perhaps as important as Wright's interest in the project is the working relationship that the poet and photographer had established over the past ten years. According to Wright, "When [they] were not specifically working on a project together, [they] were talking about working on one together."²⁵¹ Wright and Luster worked previously on two collaborative projects: *Just Whistle: A Valentine*, published in 1993, and *The Lost Roads Project: A Walk-In Book of Arkansas*, published in 1994. In many ways, their working relationship differs on each project, but because of their long relationship (they met while

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ C. D. Wright, Personal Interview, 6 March 2005.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

both growing up in Arkansas) and similar interests, their teaming up is natural. As Wright puts it:

We fall in and out of step with one another's projects without much inducement. We spring from the same hills and hardwoods, the same idiom. We took classical dance and mime and poetry together; we waitressed at the D-Luxe; we spelled each other floundering and outgrowing some of our worst inclinations on the side of hope, solidarity and expression that would give a limn of definition to otherwise unsustainable features of anger, isolation, and aimlessness. We think the same things are funny; the same things are wrong, and the same stuff unforgettable.²⁵²

Sharing a common sensibility was crucial to the collaborative process Wright and Luster developed for *One Big Self*. For *The Lost Roads Project*, Wright and Luster spent hours together—even living with their spouses in the same apartment—taking day trips to conduct interviews, shoot video, and collect books. *One Big Self* required a different kind of process.

Luster went into the project without “any sort of preconceived idea.”²⁵³ For that reason, she “wanted to maintain the immediacy of the relationship as much as possible when shooting as well as developing. She wanted to keep her eye on the individual in front of her.”²⁵⁴ Though Luster was initially motivated to photograph prisoners by her mother's 1988 contract murder, by a need to understand the killer, “Once [she] went in

²⁵² C. D. Wright, “Collaborations Part 2: Introduction to *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*,” *Crossroads: The Journal of the Poetry Society of America*, Poetry Society of America, Spring 2001. Web. 15 March 2006.

²⁵³ Jennifer Becknell, “Lives of Our Time/Finding Self,” *The Herald* (11 September 1993): 1C.

²⁵⁴ C. D. Wright, Personal Interview, 6 March 2005.

the prisons, it became something different. It was a way out of pain.”²⁵⁵ Her desire to remain candid arose out of her desire to forge connections. In her opening essay for *One Big Self*, Luster describes her state of mind after her mother’s murder: “So many lives destroyed or damaged by this greedy, stupid act. I wondered if there remained a single soul untouched by violence. Violence in the name of hatred and in the name of love; violence in the name of righteousness and the almighty buck. No contact.”²⁵⁶ After developing and printing the first set of portraits, Luster found what she calls “convergence.”²⁵⁷ In her essay, aptly titled “The Reappearance of Those Who Have Gone,” Luster explores “the formal quality of loss and the way we cannot speak directly to those who have gone”²⁵⁸ and explains that, though she doesn’t fully understand why, her need to photograph prisoners arose out of her need “to touch the disappeared.”²⁵⁹ Just as those who have died have disappeared physically, so have the prisoners she photographed physically disappeared from society and from their families. For Luster, contact—a physical or emotional meeting—is convergence. The photographs are evidence of contact, each identifying a moment when two people come together. The photographs are “evidence of life, presented here, as André Breton has written, not only as faces to be examined but also ‘as oracles to be questioned.’”²⁶⁰ Luster’s convergence is not simply the contact she found with each prisoner, but is, ultimately, the contact

²⁵⁵ Becknell 1C.

²⁵⁶ Deborah Luster, “The Reappearance of Those Who Have Gone.”

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

uncovered by confronting difference—the equal measures of “loss and hope” that Luster believes we all feel and the necessity to question the process that leads to convergence. Convergence presides over *One Big Self*: portraits converging with words, past with present, dissolution with creation.

Wright approached her role in the project in a different way, seeing it as “reflective.”²⁶¹ By that Wright does not mean her poem is mimetic, but, rather, that while Luster worked in a sort of kinesis, responding only to the prisoners themselves, she worked by sifting through the layers of social, political, cultural, and personal freight that weigh on the American penal system in order to inform her initial emotional response. A list of some fifty-seven resources—including poetry, autobiography, statistics, movies, and music—at the end of *One Big Self* attests to the depth of Wright’s research on prison life. Much of this material finds its way into Wright’s poem, which is at times meditative, at times nearly journalistic. While Luster spent hours and hours at the prisons, Wright made only three trips with her. “The rest of the time,” says Wright, “we kept the conversation running about what we were doing. She would send me rough proofs. I would read prison literature, watch prison films, take notes from my visits at the prison and correspond with a few inmates.”²⁶² While Luster immersed herself in the prisoners themselves, Wright immersed herself in prison culture—as she says, “I could not wait for my subscription of *The Angolite* to start appearing in the mailbox.”²⁶³ She sought convergence through reflecting on connections among the words of the prisoners, the texts she was reading, the movies she was watching, the music she was listening to, the

²⁶¹ C. D. Wright, Personal Interview, 17 March 2005.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ C. D. Wright, Personal Interview, 6 March 2005.

landscape she passed on the way to and from the prisons, the conversations she had with Luster.

Wright and Luster worked as partners on *One Big Self*. Both took on roles that made sense within the framework of the project—Luster with her camera, contacting the prisoners face to face; Wright with her research and writing, contacting the prisoners in context. Their roles were complementary. Luster “did not want her shots mediated by any information outside of the individual in front of her... Those were her own restrictions. And they had to do with not wanting any further distance or intervention than the camera obtains.”²⁶⁴ Wright had less face to face contact with the prisoners, but her “reading and viewing and stewing and returning to Louisiana when [she] could”²⁶⁵ allowed her a different kind of access to the prisoners—one that is personal in its attempt to come to grips with a whole culture that remains invisible to the country at large. While Luster became interested in “trying to photograph as many people as [she] could to communicate the number of people who are incarcerated,”²⁶⁶ Wright wanted her poem to reflect “questions that collect around the forms of harm and the quality of mercy”²⁶⁷ that are central to the American penal system.

The fundamental tenet of any collaboration is trust between the collaborators: trust in the each other’s vision and process. Luster and Wright’s “sensibilities

²⁶⁴ C. D. Wright, Personal Interview, 17 March 2005.

²⁶⁵ C. D. Wright, “Collaborations Part 2.”

²⁶⁶ Becknell 1C.

²⁶⁷ C. D. Wright, “Collaborations Part 2.”

dovetailed.”²⁶⁸ In part, *One Big Self* succeeds as a collaboration because it merges two visions while embracing, but not counterposing, the difference in the two voices expressed in two media. They did not spend as much time in physical proximity as O’Hara and Rivers and were not explicitly responding to each other’s work like Hughes and Baskin, but Luster and Wright’s partnership is a convergence both in the sense that Luster uses the word, as the end result of a physical or emotional meeting, and in the more general sense, a meeting of two things coming from different directions. The two media meet in the book, which is itself the result of two people working from two different directions toward a meeting. Luster and Wright did not comment on or seek to guide each other’s work; they sought, rather, “to focus, inform and steady each other.”²⁶⁹ As I will show in my integrated reading of *One Big Self* later in this chapter, Luster’s portraits and Wright’s poem speak to each other—focus, inform, and steady each other—reflecting the collaborative relationship between photographer and poet. The conversation between the photographs and the poem constitutes convergence. When describing the collaborative process of *One Big Self*, Wright emphasizes this point: “We work, finally, separately, and it is the dialogue, the quantity and quality of the dialogue, that forms the bond in the project.”²⁷⁰ My integrated reading will focus, too, on the quantity and quality of the dialogue between the words and images as they converge to identify people who, as Luster says, “usually remain unacknowledged.”²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ C. D. Wright, Personal Interview, 6 March 2005.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ C. D. Wright, Personal Interview, 17 March 2005.

²⁷¹ Pete Humes, “Focus on the Forgotten; Artist Reveals the Person Behind the Prisoner,” *Richmond Times Dispatch* 2 September 2005: D-1.

Captioning: Photography and the Word

Before jumping in to *One Big Self*, it is worth reflecting on the unique history of the relationship between photography and language that informs readers who approach this collaboration. Since its invention in the early nineteenth century, photography has been linked to language. In the Greek, “photo” means light while “graphy” means writing. Combined, “photography” means writing with light. But early critics of photography paid little attention to its affiliations with the temporal art of writing, focusing instead on its affiliations with the spatial visual arts. Painters, especially, were concerned, like Baudelaire, that photography was simply imitation and did not participate in “the sphere of the intangible and the imaginary, [or] anything that has value solely because man adds something to it from his soul.”²⁷² Such anxiety was most notably fueled by the fear that photography would somehow eclipse other forms of visual art. Perhaps during the first decades after the introduction of photography, only painters of miniature portraits should have been concerned about photography replacing painting, because, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, portraiture was the early focal point of photography.²⁷³ Such portraits, made popular by Daguerre, were almost exclusively for personal consumption. The subject of the photograph (or the family members of the subject) was free to label the portrait with name, date, location, or to leave it unlabeled. As long as it remained in the realm of the personal, this practice of written identification, which precedes the use of formal captions (a point I will return to later) rather than echoing the notion that a photograph is written with light, posed few questions about

²⁷² Charles Baudelaire, “The Modern Public and Photography,” *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete’s Island Books, 1980) 88.

²⁷³ Walter Benjamin, “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1969) 226.

photography's semantic potential, explaining why early photographic portraits elicited little critical reflection on the relationship between photography and writing. Interest in that relationship can instead most accurately be traced to the convergence of two primary factors: new technology that allowed for mass reproduction of photographs and the rise of modernism.

When, in the 1890s, the half-tone printing process was developed, newspapers and magazines were able to print photographs for the first time. The mass production and consumption of photographs that followed not only made it possible to disseminate photographs but also to make available to the public images of artworks previously accessible only to those privileged few who could travel worldwide to museums. The art world was, and still to some extent is, divided over the proliferation of images. Had photography triggered an onslaught of images that would threaten the value of the unique artifact or had it sparked a beneficial revolution in the fields of art and literature? Avant-garde artists and writers tested both. In his seminal 1935 essay "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin argues:

With the advent of the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction, photography, simultaneously with the rise of socialism, art sensed the approaching crisis which has become evident a century later. At the time, art reacted with the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*, that is, with a theology of art. This gave rise to what might be called a negative theology in the form of the idea of "pure" art, which not only denied any social function of art but also any

categorizing by subject matter. (In poetry, Mallarmé was the first to take this position.)²⁷⁴

But not all artists took refuge in the “theology of art.” A wide variety of artists, many of whom had been trained as painters, experimented with the possibilities of photography both as a new art and as a new medium that should not be considered “art” in the traditional sense. Peter Henry Emerson “was the first to assign different styles and purposes to artistic, scientific, and commercial photography” in his 1889 essays “Hints on Art”;²⁷⁵ Lewis W. Hine, who coined the term “social photography” in 1909, was concerned more with documenting the lives of America’s working class than with defining photography as an art;²⁷⁶ though he promoted pictorial photography in the 1890s, at the turn of the century Alfred Stieglitz pioneered “straight photography,” insisting that photography was a medium “uniquely equipped to convey the essence of physical reality through the representation of clearly focused detail”;²⁷⁷ and in the 1930s Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray, joined by art critic Franz Roh, asserted that photography was a medium unlike painting and that it should “invoke a fresh visual experience.”²⁷⁸ At the same time, Russian Constructivists embraced photography both as an artistic and a political tool. As a tool to promote political and social issues,

²⁷⁴ Ibid. 224.

²⁷⁵ Peter Henry Emerson, “Hints on Art,” *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete’s Island Books, 1980) 99.

²⁷⁶ Lewis Hine, “Social Photography,” *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete’s Island Books, 1980) 109.

²⁷⁷ Alfred Stieglitz, “Pictorial Photography,” *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete’s Island Books, 1980) 116.

²⁷⁸ Paul Strand, “Photography and the New Good,” *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete’s Island Books, 1980) 153.

photography's possibilities seem most obvious. Matthew Brady's Civil War photographs brought the bodies of Antietam to America's doorstep. WPA photographers made Americans aware of the plight of their poorest neighbors. But it is in the social/political dimensions where we find the most anxiety about the relationship between photography and words.

While artists explored the expressive capabilities of photography and questioned its relationship to painting, the majority of photographers practicing in the modern age were engaged in documentary photography and photojournalism. Most photographs encountered by the public were not considered "art" but, rather, evidence. The question is, evidence of what? Early in the use of photographs as evidence, primarily photographs of war, they began to be paired with captions, most of which were meant to clarify the subject, date, and location of the photograph. The notion that photographs needed to be "clarified" by language raised questions about the semantic potential and limitations of photographs that have plagued critics ever since. In his 1931 essay, "A Short History of Photography," Benjamin asks, "Will not captions become the essential component of pictures?"²⁷⁹ For documentary photographers and photojournalists captions have indeed become essential accompaniment. The motivation seems to be that as evidence—of the authenticity of a news story, of the existence of a social or political ill—the photograph is not sufficient on its own but must be "read" for the viewer, translated into words so as to define the context and intent of the photograph. In a 1952 text that has become central to the study of photojournalism, *Words and Pictures: An Introduction to Photojournalism*, Wilson Hicks lays out the fundamental argument that captions are necessary:

²⁷⁹ Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," *Classic Essays on Photography*. ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980) 215.

It is, however, significantly true that more exact though the photograph is in its imagery than the word-picture can ever be, it still falls short, in varying degrees, of saying all there is to be said about what it represents. Although the photograph frequently conveys something of the spirit as well as the reality of a subject, in both respects it has shortcomings, for which only words can compensate.²⁸⁰

As far as they serve as evidence, photographs have, time and again, been found lacking. Hicks explains that “By turning the implicit into the explicit, the words make it possible for the intended central point or idea to find its way intact into the reader’s mind.”²⁸¹ The notion that photographs *need* words in order to fulfill their function is predominant even among art critics. In his 1980 *About Looking*, John Berger argues that photographers should work against the assigned role of reporter in order to participate in the accrual, rather than “atrophy,” of social and political memory. The way to do this, Berger contends, is “to construct a context for a photograph, to construct it with words, to construct it with other photographs, to construct it by its place in an ongoing text of photographs and images.”²⁸² Berger is responding to Susan Sontag’s 1973 *On Photography*, perhaps the most influential critical discussion of photography to date. Sontag ends her opening chapter, “In Plato’s Cave,” with the assertion that “Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy...In contrast to the amorous relation, which is based on how something looks, understanding is based on how it functions. And functioning takes place

²⁸⁰ Wilson Hicks, *Words and Pictures: An Introduction to Photojournalism* (New York: Harpers and Brothers Publishers, 1952) 17.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.* 19.

²⁸² John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980) 62-64.

in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand.”²⁸³ As far as photographs foster a “sentimental” rather than “ethical or political” knowledge,²⁸⁴ Sontag suggests that photographs erode public memory because they fragment and isolate experience. Even the kind of caption envisioned by Benjamin, one that could “rescue [the photograph] from the ravages of modishness and confer upon it a revolutionary use value,”²⁸⁵ cannot, in Sontag’s estimation, give photographs the ability to produce knowledge:

In fact, words do speak louder than pictures. Captions do tend to override the evidence of our eyes; but no caption can permanently restrict or secure a picture’s meaning. What the moralists are demanding from a photograph is that it do what no photograph can ever do—speak. The caption is the missing voice, and it is expected to speak truth. But even an entirely accurate caption is only one interpretation, necessarily a limiting one, of the photograph to which it is attached. And the caption-glove slips on and off so easily. It cannot prevent any argument or moral plea which a photograph (or set of photographs) is intended to support from being undermined by the plurality of meanings that every photograph carries...²⁸⁶

Could not the same be said of any image? A critic might never speak of an “accurate caption” for a painting, because a painting, as Baudelaire reminded us earlier, is presumed to originate in the imagination, while a photograph is presumed to originate in

²⁸³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1973) 23.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 24.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 107.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 108-109.

the real. Sontag undermines her own argument by admitting that photographs, like paintings, can stimulate a plurality of meanings—the danger, it seems, is in the assumption, like that made by Hicks when he suggests that the right caption can make a photograph’s “meaning” explicit, that one of those meanings might be “accurate.”

Captions, it is argued, ensure that photographs are read accurately as evidence of a specific social, political, or moral intention; they themselves are evidence that require verbal, narrative accompaniment and readers are habituated to expect this verbal direction. Rare indeed is the book of photographs (or any images, for that matter) that is not accompanied by text. We are conditioned to be told how to read a photograph. We expect photographs to be paired with text that contextualizes—names and locates the subject, explains the significance. As Philip Gerter makes clear in his article “Reading Newspaper Pictures,” context is meant to impart significance. Gerter provides as an example a photograph of a tea set covered in dust. Without any caption, Gerter argues that the photograph can be moving—“The pervasive dust suggests ominous possibilities: this artifact of a genteel age might have been left there after a bombing or a fire, who knows how many years ago.”²⁸⁷ But when the caption is read, the photograph becomes poignant—“A tea set in a Cedar Street apartment in lower Manhattan was still covered with dust from last week’s collapse of the World Trade Center buildings. The residents have not yet returned to the apartment.”²⁸⁸ The argument that captions are necessary to create context underscores a fundamental dichotomy in the critical study of

²⁸⁷ Philip Gerter, “Reading Newspaper Pictures: A Thousand Words, and Then Some,” *Aperture* 173 (Winter 2003): 48.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 48.

photography—that photographs are either personal or public but never both.²⁸⁹ A photograph with no caption offers itself up for a range of personal interpretations, but only a photograph with a caption can narrate a public significance. Once that significance has been fixed by the caption, the photograph is effectively closed to personal identification. The photographs in *One Big Self* are not given narrative captions like the one attached to the photograph of the tea set, but they are accompanied by several layers of verbal context (names, dates, numbers, and the poem itself). By eschewing the traditional caption while providing verbal mediation that actively works against fixing the subject of the photograph, Luster and Wright attempt to straddle the personal and the public, to show that they are part of the larger whole rather than discreet parts.

Roland Barthes' 1980 *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* might well have been titled *personal* reflections on photography, for his concern is not with understanding a photographer's intention but with understanding how and why particular photographs "prick" him.²⁹⁰ Barthes dispenses with "accurate captions" and creates his own, based on his philosophy that the genius of photography lies in its transparency. Unlike writing or painting, photography, for Barthes, does not require human intention—it is "the chemical revelation of the object"²⁹¹—and so does not need to be contextualized. When, where, why, of what, a photograph is taken does not matter. Rather than defending photography's ability to "speak" for itself, to impart ethical and political knowledge, Barthes sidesteps the argument altogether. Michael North contends

²⁸⁹ Berger 61.

²⁹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1981) 27.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.* 10.

that Barthes' interest in photography as an autonomous art informed his later essay proclaiming the death of the author.²⁹² No wonder, then, that Barthes does not even mention captions when discussing photography—to apply language to a photograph would be to compound the mistake he believes most critics commit when examining photographs: “What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance.”²⁹³ In *The Spoken Image: Photography & Language*, Clive Scott agrees with Barthes when he asserts:

The distinguishing characteristic of the caption is that it is already a step away from the image towards its assimilation by, and interpretation through, language...the caption is spoken; it is an intervention, a response forestalling the response of the viewer...the innate candour of the image is subjugated to the guile of language.²⁹⁴

Photographers themselves frequently use text to define their work. Flipping through *Photography Speaks: 150 Photographers on Their Art* provides a telling overview. Each photographer is represented by one photograph accompanied by a title. These titles can be divided into three distinct camps: the “art” title, the “document” title, and the “caption” title. Titles such as *Happy Days*, *The Source*, *Lady in Black with Statuette*, *Egg on an Ebony Block*, *The Masks Grow to Us*, and *Woman Contemplating Red* are intended to define the photograph as “art.” “Document” titles—such as *Great Falls of the Yellowstone*, *Joseph Stalin in the Kremlin*, *The Human Pincushion*, *Along*

²⁹² Michael North, “Authorship and Autography,” *PMLA* 116.5: 1379.

²⁹³ Barthes 51.

²⁹⁴ Clive Scott, *The Spoken Image: Photography & Language* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999) 49-52.

Interstate 25, and *McLean, Virginia*—are meant to define the focal point or primary subject of the photograph. Finally, “caption” titles—*It Was Around Dinner When the Ball Went Through the Screen*; *I Am A Man, Sanitation Workers Strike, Memphis, Tennessee*; *Ammunition Airlift into Besieged Khe Sahn*; *Easter Sunday in Harlem*; *Biscuit Lady, a member of the Wilkins family making biscuits dinner on corn shucking day at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Fred Wilkins, near Stern and Tallyho, North Carolina*—are meant to define or interpret the significance of the photograph. Despite the fact that these three types of titles tell us different things about the photographs, they are all forms of mediation—they all “fix” the photograph for the reader. The artists’ motivations for using one or another of these title types are undoubtedly quite different, but what is significant is that all are motivated to define their photographs with words. Perhaps Alexander Gardner, Civil War photographer, best captures this impulse in his introductory comments accompanying the photograph *Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter*, published in *Gardner’s Sketch Book of the War* (1866): “In presenting *The Photographic Sketch Book of the War* to the public, it is designed that it shall speak for itself. The omission, therefore, of any remarks by way of preface might well be justified; and yet, perhaps, a few introductory words may not be amiss.”²⁹⁵

With opinions on whether photographs require mediation found at such polar extremes, how should readers approach a verbal-visual collaboration that includes photography and poetry? Because of conditioning, a reader might seek to read the poetry as a kind of captioning of the photographs or the photographs as illustrations for the poetry, or because of a desire to view photographs as art requiring no mediation, a reader

²⁹⁵ Brooks Johnson, ed., *Photography Speaks: 150 Photographers on Their Art* (New York: Aperture Foundation, Inc., 2004) 52.

might seek to separate the poetry from the photographs. For *One Big Self*, either approach would be incomplete because, as I will argue in my integrated reading, the pairing of photographs and poetry deliberately undermines any expectation that the photographs illustrate the poem or the poem captions the photographs and because the design scheme insists we read the two together. Though Luster does title the photographs and provide information below them that might be called captions, neither of these verbal elements function solely as narrative accompaniment or as explanation of the subject matter; indeed the titles and captions help us to acquire knowledge only when we put them in dialogue with the photographs and the poem.

***One Big Self* In Context: Photo-Verbal Collaborations and Collections**

One Big Self is one of a number of books published in recent decades that combines photography and text, but as a review of such books will show, most do not seek to integrate the two. Perhaps the most famous photo-verbal collaboration is James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Agee and Evans, in a process similar to that used by Wright and Luster for *The Lost Roads Project*, conducted fieldwork together, on assignment for *Fortune* magazine. Together they documented the lives of three tenant farmer families, Agee in text and Evans in photographs. The resulting book gathers the photographs, with no titles or captions, at the beginning of the book, with Agee's text following. The book design makes clear that neither the photographs nor the text is meant to illustrate the other. What is unclear, though, is how to read the relationship between the two. Agee's preface seems promising at first: "The photographs are not illustrative. They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent,

and fully collaborative.”²⁹⁶ The separation of the photographs and the text was experimental in 1939, when most books containing text and photographs used the photographs as illustrations, a practice that Agee is careful to negate, in the event that the book design is not clear enough. A few sentences later, though, Agee muddies the water: “It was intended, also, that the text be read continuously, as music is listened to or a film watched, with brief pauses only where they are self-evident.”²⁹⁷ If the photographs are not meant to be illustrative, if the text is meant to be read separately (and by default, the photographs read separately as well), how then is a reader to understand the relationship between the two? *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was pioneering in its handling of photographs and text as “coequal,” but the tension between Agee’s two descriptors, “mutually independent” and “fully collaborative,” calls attention to the fact that, in reacting against the history of images illustrating text and text captioning images, Agee and Evans’s decision to treat the text and photographs as independent belies a fully collaborative relationship. Where Agee and Evans fall short of a fully collaborative photo-verbal book, Luster and Wright succeed by maintaining “coequity” while at the same time breaking all the familiar rules for how photographs and poetry, indeed images and words, interact.

Since the publication of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, photo-verbal collaborations remain rare compared to the number of books that simply collect text and photography together. While the popularity of photography and the dominance of the image in the twentieth century have led to a rise in the number of photography books and

²⁹⁶ James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1939) xv.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.* xv.

magazines meant primarily for visual consumption, such books are usually not solely visual. Within the surprising number of books that juxtapose poetry and photographs, the vast majority do so in order to illustrate or to document. While it is more common for photographs to illustrate poems—as in books like *Mazes* (1970), by Muriel Rukeyser; *The Indian Cheap Wine Séance* (1974), by Adrian C. Louis; *The Beer Poems* (1979), by Peter Gregutt; *The Book of Perceptions* (1999), by Truong Tran; and *The Vision of Words* (1992), a compilation of poetry by Southeast Michigan poets accompanied by interpretive photographs—there is no shortage of books in which the poems actually “illustrate” the photographs. In some a poet “responds” to photographs as in Bryan Holme and Thomas Forman’s *Poet’s Camera* (1946), Thom and Ander Gunn’s *Positives* (1966), or Simon Perchik and Robert Frank’s *The Snowcat Poems, 1980-1981, to the Photographs of Robert Frank* (1991). In others, editors of a photographic anthology include accompanying poetry as in *Light and Shadow: The Photographs of Claire Yaffa* (1997), with poems by Jeffery Bean, or *Ansel Adams: Trees* (2004), accompanied by contemporary and historic poetry. Because such books identify one medium as dominant by restricting the other to illustration, they should be considered collections rather than collaborations.

A similar genre of photo-verbal books is what I call “theme” books—collections of photographs and text that both speak to a particular theme, which, judging by the number of such books available in stores and online, are the most commercially successful type of photo-verbal collections. While most are books of photographs accompanied by an essay, others mix photographs and poetry. Books with such romantic titles as *Mothers: A Celebration in Prose, Poetry, and Photographs of Mothers and*

Motherhood (1988), *Poetry of Roses* (1995), and *Beaches* (2000) are typically sentimental collections and are primarily commercial ventures. Documentary photo-verbal books share a similar sentiment in terms of presenting moving images and words, but the intent is usually social or political. Collections of photographs and poems like Ted Hughes and Fay Godwin's *The Remains of Elmet* (1979), Patti Smith's *The Coral Sea* (1997), Jacques Prévert and Louise Izis-Bidermanas' *Charmes de Londres* (1999), and Earl Shaffer and Bart Smith's *The Appalachian Trail: Calling Me Back to the Hills* (2007) are meant to recover something lost or document something about to be lost. Titles like *Not All Those Who Wander are Lost* (1967), *Green Ghetto* (1972), and *Burning Heart: A Portrait of the Philippines* (1999) have a political point to make.

Because *One Big Self* does participate in a type of photographic documentation, and because many documentary photo-verbal books contain work by two individuals, it is tempting to include it in this list of titles. But *One Big Self* is not just documentary, nor does it work as a lovely, themed coffee table book. There is no single political point to be derived from its convergence of photographs and poetry. Whereas most photo-verbal collections are the result of an initial idea for a single theme or the documentation of a specific subject, *One Big Self* was originally a product of the desire to collaborate and the themes explored in the book are discovered in the process of that collaboration.

Reading *One Big Self*: “In a prison the environment dictates many of the terms.”²⁹⁸

When first opening *One Big Self* to read, one may be struck by the appearance of absence. Absent are many of the markers we have come to expect in books to be read: page numbers, headers and footers, table of contents. An attempt to read *One Big Self* in the traditional linear way, paging through the book from left to right, accruing knowledge

²⁹⁸ C. D. Wright, Personal Interview, 6 March 2005.

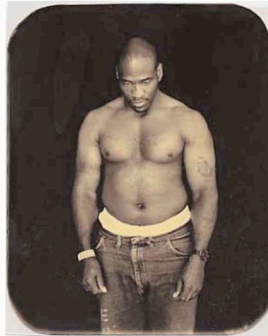
that builds progressively from page one to the end, quickly reveals the inadequacy of such an approach. Delaying the title spread for four spreads is yet another design element that deliberately disrupts the reader's expectations. Rather than being told who and what we are looking at before we begin looking, we are thrust into four spreads of starkly arranged photographs of prisoners, one on the first spread and then four per spread on the next three, what Luster calls an "'archive of human beings.'"²⁹⁹ The initial absence of key knowledge for deciphering the different textual and pictorial elements on these pages—as described at the opening of this chapter—seems to defy the title's invitation, that the reader may step into this ill-understood world of the prison and become part of "one big self." On the contrary, the absence of information forces an overt questioning of the processes of reading and understanding.

The first spread of *One Big Self* opens as a base presentation of the various textual, pictorial, and graphic elements that build the book, and places them in a dialogue that forces the reader both to arrange and rearrange the elements and to focus and refocus the eye and the mind. The first page of the spread is actually the book's flyleaf, and in keeping with traditional book design, it is blank. The blank page should not be discounted as an artifact of book design: this flyleaf is black and contrasts sharply with the opposing white page whose minimal design arranges an epigraph, photograph, title, and caption into a zigzag of text/image/text [Figure 27]. The black-white contrast establishes an irregular pattern of design features, akin to the contrasts in an M. C. Escher sketch, that undercut simplistic divisions by throwing them off balance. The epigraph, attributed to

²⁹⁹ Quoted in Pete Humes.

Maybe all men got one big soul where everybody's
a part of— all faces of the same man.
one big self.

— Terrence Malick



"Hustleman" Transylvania, Louisiana

doc # 127809
dob. 8.17.76
pub. Shreveport
tattoo. *Naughty*
by Nature
Born Killer
ECPFF 1999

Fig. 27. Spread One from *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*. Courtesy of Twin Palms Press.

Terrence Malick, further testifies to the book's project of integrating disparate forces. It is the quotation from which the title of the project is taken: "Maybe all men got one big soul where everybody's a part of—all faces of the same man: one big self." The placement of the epigraph directly beside the first portrait of the book and its grammar and diction may lead the reader to infer that the words are those of "Hustleman," the name given in the portrait's title. This is just the first of many moments in the book where the reader may wonder whether the connection between the text and the photographs is a simple one to one correlation—words spoken by the pictured prisoner. But Terrence Malick is a screenwriter and film director whose words are taken from his 1998 movie *The Thin Red Line*, which focuses on the conflict of Guadalcanal in WWII. There must be some other connection between the epigraph and the portrait.

The poignancy of the title can speak for itself, particularly when applied to representing prisoners, those who have been removed from our larger society, but an understanding of the source of the title demonstrates the way connective links may be made among the various elements of each spread. *The Thin Red Line* is comprised of a series of images interspersed with the words of the soldiers and overlaid by voiceovers. As film critic Hwanhee Lee notes,

[the film] is structured in terms of various oppositional elements (or 'wars' or *polemos*). These include oppositions such as those between 'individual' and 'collectivity' (or the self and the other), as exemplified by the film's very odd use of voiceover narrations. The voiceovers are read by different characters, but not necessarily the ones that are on screen while the lines are uttered. Furthermore, the flashbacks and the 'subjective, mental' images are insufficiently distinguished

from the ‘objective, corporeal’ images [referring to the blend of images that depict the thoughts of different characters and images that depict the linear, narrative events].³⁰⁰

“Insufficient” is strikingly negative in its description of what could also be seen as Malick’s attempt to allow the viewer to “read” the relationship among the images without overt direction. In this way, the ghost presence of *The Thin Red Line* and Malick’s experiment in disrupting our expectations of how images and words relate in a film, in order to allow viewers to discover their own connections and so create knowledge, informs the interaction of verbal and visual elements in *One Big Self*. The idea of a thin line protecting the masses from attack is used in both the military (the thin red line) and the police force (the thin blue line). In its attempt to question artificial boundaries, *One Big Self* deals in thin lines, too, as it destabilizes the lines protecting private from public, love from hate, and word from image.

On the first spread the reader encounters the thin line between connection and disjunction. Hustleman’s portrait, placed in conversation with the epigraph, presents an enigma. The title reveals that “Hustleman” is the nickname of a man incarcerated in Transylvania, Louisiana. The fact of his incarceration coupled with the appearance of a man with downcast eyes and a well-muscled body that nonetheless sags, might initially elicit sympathy. This man looks defeated, demoralized. Below the dejected prisoner and bare title, the caption identifies him as “doc #127809,” compounding the initial impression of sympathy for a man who has been reduced to a number. But four lines down, the caption also reports that the man has a tattoo: “Naughty/by Nature/Born

³⁰⁰ Hwanhee Lee, “Terrence Malick,” *Senses of Cinema*, Senses of Cinema, Inc., November 2002.

Killer.” Is the tattoo pictured? Reading the caption requires reading the photograph again, which reveals that the tattoo is not visible (it may be on the man’s back or covered by his pants). Instead, what appears to be a medical tag wrapped around his right wrist becomes visible. The pictorial evidence raises questions about the photograph’s relationship to the textual evidence. Here is a man who boasts of being a born killer but who looks anything but boastful, who may in fact be ill. What crime did he commit? The caption identifies no crime, nor does it reveal his sentence. Despite the epigraph’s promise of universal identification, Hustleman’s identity remains out of reach. Seeing him pictured makes him more than a number, and the title seemingly satisfies a minimum requirement by naming and placing him; but is that enough? In his review of *One Big Self*, Jay Grelen finds that “the book omits a crucial component. You never learn why they [the prisoners] are there.”³⁰¹ To identify Hustleman, or to identify with him, is it necessary to know his crime? Luster and Wright argue that it is not, and because they choose not to make that information available, they force us to find other ways to identify him.

If captions serve to “fix” a photograph, then Luster’s photographs remain relatively unfixed. Many of those pictured are nameless, because, as mentioned earlier, some of the prisoners asked that their names be omitted. Even when names are provided, though, they do not fix identity—a name does not equate with a “self” in this book any more than remaining unnamed equates with anonymity. Because prisoners reported their own names (along with other standard elements of classification such as work assignment), names and nicknames (or their lack) function more to highlight the methods of categorization used by and within America’s penal system and so also function to

³⁰¹ Jay Grelen, “Sweat Tea: Sketches of Inmates Incomplete,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* 14 October 2004: Arkansas.

question the necessity of names for purposes of identification and for forming connections. To what extent should the man pictured on the title spread be considered a hustler? Is he hustling himself with that name or us?

Nor do the place names prove to fix identity. This book is not really about prisons—there are no photographs of any of the prisons—and if we think that knowing where the person pictured is incarcerated matters, that notion is countered by the refusal of the caption to engage in reductive identification. Perhaps this is why Luster and Wright have chosen to report, in addition to the titles included directly below each photograph, the information filled out by each prisoner during the photo sessions. To what extent does this information serve as a caption in the traditional sense? In many ways it does serve to contextualize the portraits by providing date and place of birth, length of sentence, and where and when the photograph was taken. The prisoners can also choose to reveal their future plans, if the sentence allows for future plans, what work they do while incarcerated, how many children they have, and what their tattoos say. The authorship of these “captions,” reported by the prisoners themselves, reveals more about how the prisoners see themselves than about what is visible in the photographs. The function of tattoos is telling here—in prison, especially, tattoos are a means of identification, in particular identification with a gang, but also a means of self expression that allow the prisoners to exert a certain level of control over their own bodies. Just as the tattoos allow the prisoners some measure of control over how they identify themselves, so do Luster and Wright give them the control over what information they reveal to identify themselves in their captions. If a good caption makes explicit what is implicit in a photograph, as Wilson Hicks argues it should, then neither the titles nor the

captions in this book function as a good caption should because they only add to the implicit. Nor do these words speak louder, as Susan Sontag suggests they will, than the photographs.

So how do the titles and captions function? In a way they both serve to contextualize, but they also simultaneously highlight the inadequacy of one-dimensional context. Contextual layers, built when the reader is asked to move back and forth from text to image to text, allow Luster's photographs to do something that John Berger believes no photograph can do—straddle the line between private and public. Unlike a mug shot, the kind of portrait through which the public is used to viewing prisoners, Luster's portraits do not present faces for simple visual identification. These are private portraits both because they are intimate—as Luster reveals in her opening essay, she photographed the prisoners “as they presented their very own selves”—and because each prisoner was provided with wallet-size reprints to send to family members who had not been able to see their loved ones, sometimes for years. The creation of the book also makes them public. They are private because each prisoner chooses how to present him or herself, asking Luster not to impose a narrative, and also public because the interaction of photographs and text create the context Berger claims is necessary to activate the accrual of public memory. By collecting personal portraits for the public, *One Big Self* operates in some ways like a museum, but whereas in most museums the public is not encouraged to interact with the art, in *One Big Self*, we must interact on a personal level with the portraits of the prisoners and we must do so by reintegrating them into our understanding of the public rather than accepting them as “the disappeared.”

Men, women, old, young, black, white, scarred, healthy. Each pose is different. One man bends his legs and arms and lifts his face in prayer [Figure 26]. A woman with elaborately arranged hair turns her face to the side and gazes at the unseen, her head just barely tilted back and her mouth set in a perceptible but enigmatic smile [Figure 28]. As the reader moves among the portraits and the information text, more questions emerge. Why have they posed in such different ways? Why are their clothes so different? Why have they faced the camera or turned away? Essentially: who are these people? Answers do not really begin to accrue until the book becomes fully integrated; that is, until the introduction of C.D. Wright's poem into the dialogue.

To demonstrate how a reader might practice an integrated reading of *One Big Self*, I turn now to the first spread on which Luster's photographs appear with text from Wright's poem, the thirteenth spread. This spread is the fourth spread after the poem is introduced by title on the ninth spread of the book. The thirteenth spread [Figure 29] presents paired photographs, on the right page, that offer contrasting images—black clothing, cream skin in the left photograph and cream clothing, black skin in the right photograph; a young, healthy, coquettish woman in the left photograph, and a middle-aged, wheelchair-bound, frail, frightened/resigned/hollowed man in the right photograph. Both serve "LIFE." The most apparent visual similarity of the two photographs is the white eyes that stare from both, made all the more startling by both being rimmed in black (one artificially, one naturally).

On the left page, lines of the poem are scattered within a rough rectangle of space. This portion of Wright's poem is comprised of discrete quotes from mostly unidentified prisoners; only one quote is attributed to a specific person. Because the poem title is



Fig. 28. Spread Four from *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*. Courtesy of Twin Palms Press.

She is so sweet. You wouldn't believe she had did all the things they say
she did.

Don't ask.

My mug shot totally turned me against being photographed.

I miss silverware, with a knife,
I miss the moon,
and maybe even something to cut with it.

I miss a bathtub
And a toilet. With a lid. And a handle.
And a door.

When Grasshopper came to Big Gola his wife was pregnant. He saw the baby once.
Next when he was 20. Now he's inside. In Texas. Second time. But he's short now
He'll get out soon.

That's hard.
I don't go there.

I miss driving.

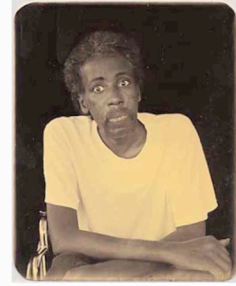
We're both here because of love. --Zabonia of herself and her best friend

I am highly hypnotizable.

I would wash that man's feet and drink the water.



Misty Buffington St. Gabriel, Louisiana



Joe Jackson Angola, Louisiana

Doc # 107888
dob: 1.12.78
pub: Denver, CO
sentence: LIFE
work: horticulture
Halloween
Haunted House
LCIW 10.27.00

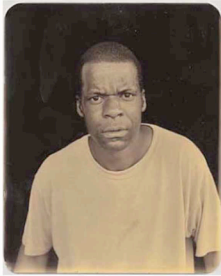
Doc # 105688
dob: 4.16.59
pub: Independence
entered LSP: 1984
sentence: 3 LIFE
No Duty
DOD 7.28.99
LSP 3.18.99
Prison Hospital

Fig. 29. Spread Thirteen from *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*. Courtesy of Twin Palms Press.

introduced four spreads back, the reader enters this first integrated spread with partial textual knowledge that has not yet been fully connected to visual knowledge. On the ninth spread the poem title, byline—“One Big Self/by C. D. Wright”—and an epigraph are introduced among four portraits, mirroring, in several ways, the title page of the book [Figure 30]. The four photographs are a mini-archive for the larger archive contained in the book. The first is of a man who appears angry or confused. He stares almost belligerently at the camera, his white shirt and black skin presenting a stark contrast to the solid black background. These contrasts serve to highlight his expression, itself so inscrutable that the reader, in desperation, moves to the caption below. The key seems to be the line “Mental Health Unit.” Is this an explanation, allowing the reader to move on to the next portrait, or an invitation, asking the reader to return to Larry Knighton’s portrait to question whether his expression is indeed belligerent? The other three portraits provide similar opportunities for movement among information, photograph, and epigraph. The epigraph, which the reader discovers is actually an epitaph, challenges the reader, in two ways, to move back into the photographs before turning the page. First, the epigraph/epitaph’s message—“God was pleased by the good he did and we pray his mercy for the wrong”—links back to the book’s opening epigraph, with its implication that at some point we should all be welcomed back into the fold, and to the overarching notion that identity is multivalent and variable. Second, the explanation that this quotation is the only epitaph to be found at Point Lookout Cemetery at Angola and that it memorializes Charles C. Howell, an inmate who had been released from Angola but who stipulated in his will that he be brought back inside Angola to be buried, encourages the reader to reflect on the extent to which prison life has marked these people. Was “Juice”

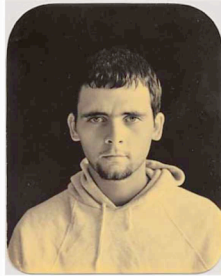
One Big Self
by C.D. Wright

God was pleased by the good he did and we pray his mercy for the wrong — the low epitaph at Point Lookout Cemetery, Angola.
Charles C. Howell, died in January nineteen and thirty-four, at thirty-four years of age, and as stipulated in his will was brought back inside for burial after he was released.



Larry Knighten Transylvania, Louisiana

doc # 24873
dob: 11.16.63
pob: Baton Rouge
sentence: 3 years
transferred to:
Fl. Wade Prison
Mental Health Unit
ECPP 1998



"Juice" Angola, Louisiana

doc # 360828
dob: 11.8.76
pob: Hart, MI
entered LSP: 1997
sentence: 12 years
work: A & B Squad
LSP 3.19.99



"Bolotte" Transylvania, Louisiana

doc # 337700
dob: 6.19.65
pob: Monroe
sentence: 8 1/2 years
5 children
future plans:
self-employed
ECPP 4.1.00



Christina Kolozsvari St. Gabriel, Louisiana

doc # 300079
dob: 10.7.64
pob: Canada
sentence: 5 years
3 children
work: outer perimeter
LC19 6.25.99

Fig. 30. Spread Nine from *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*. Courtesy of Twin Palms Press.

always such a hardened young man? Do Bolottie's burned face and sorrowful eyes reveal more about his internal scars than his external situation? Why is Larry in the mental health unit? Why has Christina rolled her sleeves to reveal tattoos that she has chosen not to transcribe on her information form? To what extent are these questions even applicable to understanding identity? Finding a way out of these questions requires finding a way into the multivalent connections made possible by the integration of photographs, information, and poem.

The poem itself begins on the next spread, spread ten, with a series of commands, all beginning "Count." The list includes fourteen items, among them "your blessings" and "your stars (lucky or not)." The list, which forms a visual column on the left page, is followed on the right page by a block of five lines that appear visually like a paragraph rather than the lines of a poem, but this block is suddenly disrupted when the sixth line breaks after two words, skips several spaces and then begins to be lineated as a poem, continuing on for eight lines before coming to an abrupt end [Figure 31]. More white space intervenes before the reader encounters another block of text approximately the same length, size, and shape as the captions that accompany photographs. The visual range of the first spread of the poem matches the range of its content. From the list of counting commands the poem moves into language that imitates prison guard commands. Wright neither glosses this foreign language (for example: "I/m must stand for the count.") nor acknowledges that it might be foreign to a reader. In the same way that the variety of poses and props seen in the photographs reflect the circumstances of the prisoners, as the prisoners choose to present those circumstances, the poem is built on the rules governing the prisons, and the freedom and/or inhibition the prisoners felt to speak

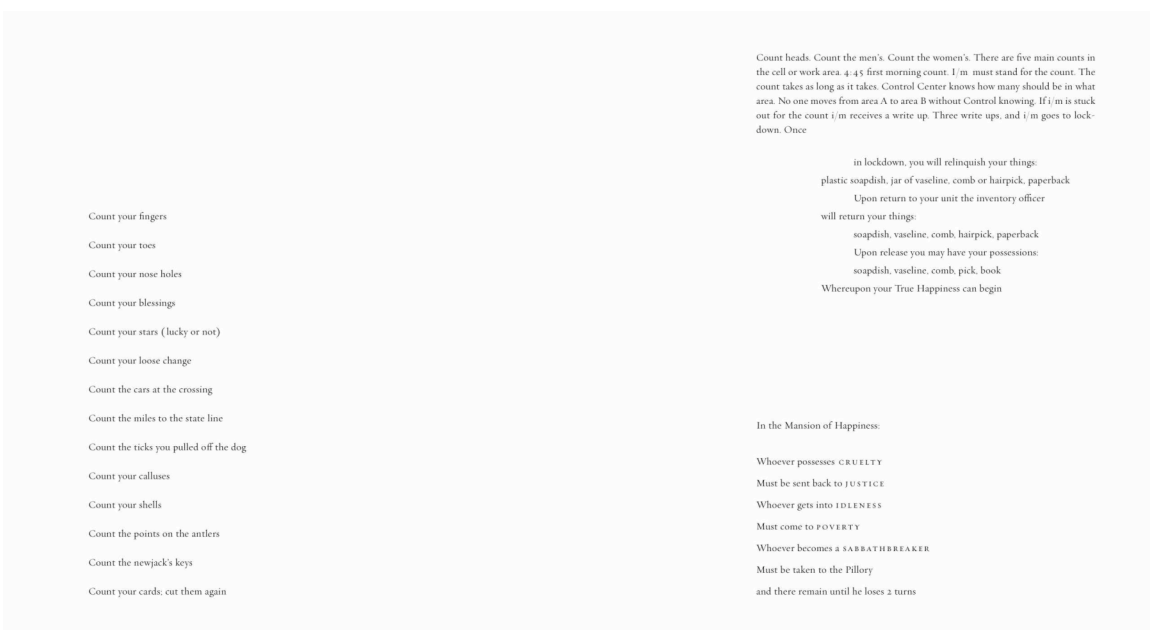


Fig. 31. Spread Ten from *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*. Courtesy of Twin Palms Press.

their lives to Wright. The reader must enter both the poem and the photographs on the prisoners' terms, as they identify themselves—through words, poses, costumes—which means entering with a willingness to be enfolded in the dialogue, even in the face of initial dissonance.

The design that introduces the poem initially places the poem in contrast to the photographs. Spread nine is composed primarily of photographs, while the next spread contains only text from the poem. Two more spreads alternate in this way before the reader finally encounters spread thirteen, with its fully integrated presentation of textual, visual, and graphic elements. The spread can be read as containing three types of representation—poem, a representation filtered by the poet; photograph, a representation filtered by the photographer; and biographical information, a representation filtered by the prisoner—within which are multiple possibilities for discovering connections. White space creates a three-dimensional world in which word and image meet. The spread is composed of ample white space on which the text of the poem, the photographs, and the information text appear to “float”—on the left page, containing the text of the poem, the area of white space is approximately 96.25 square inches surrounding approximately 41.25 square inches of text, while on the right page, containing two photographs, the area of white space is approximately 93.25 square inches surrounding approximately 44.25 square inches of images and information texts. On both sides of the spread, the white space is roughly twice as large as the space occupied by text or images, yet the thick quality to the images when placed against the white field, a result of the photographs initially being printed on prepared aluminum plates, combined with the heavy black

background of each portrait, causes the right page to appear weightier than the left. As a result, the reader's eyes are drawn across the lines of the poem to the two portraits.

The task of reading the lines of the poem in relation to the photographs/information text is necessarily challenging, made even more so by the various graphic elements that separate the two. There are no tool lines, literal lines drawn across a spread, or other graphic features that connect the photographs to the text of the poem. Additionally, the poem is separated from the photographs by the shadowed gutter. But, because the lines of the poem, the photographs, and the information text "float" on a field of white space, the reader can approach these primary elements as dynamic; none of the primary elements is marked as "dominant" by any graphic features, though the positioning of the titles and captions below each photograph (and the design of the captions that echoes the shape of the photographs above) indicates that the information presented there is specific to the person posing in the photograph. No such necessary link is enforced between the lines of the poem and the prisoners posing in the photographs (or the accompanying information text).

Points of convergence are subtle, dynamic, and layered. One type of convergence can be initiated by investigating the visual features of the poem and the narrative features of the photographs in order to parse what they say to each other across the gutter. The most striking visual feature of the poem is the spacing of the lines, which enhances the discrete quality of each line. The result is a collage of voices, and the presentation of these voices with photographs of specific prisoners indicates that the voices are not disembodied but emanate from living bodies. In fact, the discrete lines spaced within the white field can be seen as scattered bodies, or speakers, in a room, a conversation. Still,

the reader is forced to resist the urge to read the poem as illustrating the photographs because these speakers—Juanita, Willie, Grasshopper—are not the people pictured in the photographs. Nor are Misty or Joe’s photographs—whose props (Misty’s Halloween costume and the wheelchair that visibly supports Joe) are the most striking narrative feature of the photographs—necessarily portraits of those unnamed inmates referenced in the poem. Both the photographs and the poem straddle the line between private and public—both are intimate and communal, built of the voices and bodies of men and women who risk exposure to find contact. In this way, both also document while simultaneously reminding us of the best in art, infused—by Wright, Luster, and the prisoners—as they are with “something . . . from [their] soul.” Perhaps the biggest test of how well they converge is, as Susan Sontag asks, whether they work together to produce knowledge.

The content of the lines of poetry and the photographs on this spread serves to enforce the relationship between the words spoken by the prisoners and the physical condition of the prisoners, and this relationship instantiates the value and importance of chancing contact. The series of lines beginning with “I miss” (all but one of which are indented) show the link between the physical realities the prisoners face and the psychological ramifications. In ascending order, the prisoners miss the outside world (moon), individual choice (silverware/food), privacy (bathtub, toilet, lid, handle, door), and freedom (driving). When looking at the two photographs presented on the right side, the reader sees those physical realities embodied. Misty has *chosen* to pose in her Halloween costume, a small choice, but for someone serving life in prison, as her caption reveals, the freedom to be someone else, even for a day, is important to understanding

how she wishes to be identified. Her careful styling of hair and make-up, combined with our knowledge that she was only twenty-two when this photograph was taken, begins to reveal an identity—a young, perhaps even innocent, girl, still longing for material pleasures that seem inconsequential next to those fundamental desires listed in the poem. In contrast, Joe has *chosen* not to hide his frailty, a more dramatic choice because he does not appear to revise his situation, and his physical condition magnifies the lack of choices and provisions provided these prisoners. He is confined to the prison hospital, has no work duties, and is serving three life sentences. The crushing weight of his situation, visible in his manic eyes, makes missing silverware seem trivial. Joe is unable to mask mental deterioration, to use his portrait, like Misty uses hers, as an opportunity to define himself in terms other than those enforced by his incarceration. Ironically, he lists his place of birth as “Independence.” Together, Misty and Joe identify extremes—the kind of extremes that might be inevitable when sentenced to life in prison—that limn the variety of faces and lives that Luster and Wright hope to gather as one big self.

The images of the tangible objects missed by the prisoners hover in the white space and ask the reader to reflect on what the daily lives of the two people in the photographs might look like. Three of the lines in the poem refer to people not necessarily present in the two photographs—the first line may very well refer to Misty, but, taken out of specific context, the reader cannot know for sure. The fact of the caption below Misty’s photograph does have some bearing—she is serving life, so perhaps the reader cannot “believe all the things they say she did.” What lies behind her coquettish smile? The next line of the poem, “Don’t ask,” is a telling point of convergence—what Misty, or any of those pictured *did* is the least important question to ask when seeking to

identify the prisoner, because it is a question that works to fix identity rather than to open the questioner up to the layers of representation of the prisoners made available by the poem, photographs, and text.

The lines about Grasshopper, who was a prisoner in Angola and who has seen his baby only once, might be connected to Joe, but when the reader looks at the caption, it becomes evident that Joe cannot be Grasshopper because Grasshopper, as the poem reveals, is now incarcerated in Texas, while Joe is still in Angola, waiting in the prison hospital to die. The caption below Joe reveals that he died just four months after having his picture taken. Like Grasshopper, Joe is “short now” and will “get out soon”; the prisoner is speaking in the poem of Grasshopper’s imminent release from prison, while Joe’s release will be of a different kind. Again, the poet’s voice interrupts the prisoners to say “That’s hard./I don’t go there.”—but the reader is forced to “go there” when looking at Joe and Misty, both of whom implore with their eyes that the reader not turn away from them.

The last three lines of the poem on this spread move away from the visual and toward the intangible—motivation, susceptibility, spirituality—and encourage the reader to look for the intangible in the photographs as well. The first of these last lines is the only line on the spread to be attributed to a specific prisoner. Zabonia is not pictured on this spread, nor in fact in any photograph in the book, and perhaps her literal physical absence adds resonance to her insight: “We’re both here because of love.” Though her body is absent from the spread, her presence is felt in her words, which are substantiated by the earlier observations about the two prisoners who are physically present. These portraits are not fascinating studies of deviants but rather representations of people who

seek and miss basic human dignities and who are motivated by the most basic human emotion. The penultimate line might very well seem to deflate the resonance of the previous line, but that any one of these prisoners could be “highly hypnotizable” is, in fact, the most resonant line in this part of the poem, calling as it does on the physical effects of language and the discursive powers of the visual: to hypnotize a person requires repetition of verbal and visual stimuli. Moreover, with its focus shifting within a field of visual and verbal stimuli, *One Big Self* is designed to *prevent* the reader from being hypnotized by requiring active discovery of relationships. The eyes of the two prisoners may *seem* to seduce, but these people are part of a larger conversation, even if specific words cannot be attributed to them, and as such are not simply visual artifacts. The words of the prisoners remind the reader of how vulnerable they are to being labeled—“My mug shot totally turned me against being photographed.” These are people who have been represented as prisoners, not people, and the strength of the combined visual, verbal, and biographical representations is in undoing that single, reductive identity and forcing the reader to participate in their histories, thoughts, and corporeal existence.

Luster and Wright work against the impulse to label, to “fix” identity by mingling their arts without directing or oversubscribing the relationship. In the same way that neither Luster nor Wright directed the other to approach their collaboration in a particular way with a particular goal, they invite readers to discover for themselves how the poem and photographs interact. The final line on the spread suggests that voyeuristic knowledge of the other is not knowledge at all, and that the process by which one comes to know and understand the other is something sacred. When a prisoner says “I would wash that man’s feet and drink the water” she indicates not only that she would humble

herself before “that man” (presumably the man mentioned earlier who is also in jail because of love), as Jesus humbled himself to serve his apostles, but that she would go a step farther and drink the dirty bath water. Such a declaration, fraught as it is with religious implication, also serves well to pinpoint Luster and Wright’s argument that the process of understanding the other is not easy, is in fact humbling, requires active participation, and involves taking what we can get—what is offered or sometimes just the residue. Joe is “frozen” as he was in March of 1999, but the reader knows he is now dead. Misty appears so young, not yet submitting to the physical hardships of incarceration, but the reader knows that she is in for life, that she will not stay as she is or as she appears to be.

Roughly the same graphic features of spread thirteen adhere for all of the spreads in *One Big Self* that integrate poem and portraits (twenty-one of the ninety-one spreads do so), with variations in the amount of white space relative to the amount of poem text. Originally, Wright says, she and Luster “had not wanted to braid the text and photos but put the text at the back.”³⁰² The book designer, Jack Woody (founder of Twin Palms Press), saw this as a mistake and designed, instead, an integrated book. But what of the seventy spreads that are not fully integrated? Should they be, can they be, read in an integrated way? If the reader is to feel the full impact of the collaboration, they must be. Spreads twenty-three and twenty-four are good examples of why.

On spread twenty-three the left page contains pure white space and the right page contains a single photograph, in the right column. The portrait is simultaneously disturbing and heartbreaking [Figure 32]. Pamela Winfield is photographed wearing an Easter bunny suit that entirely covers her. In her mittened hands she holds a hand-made

³⁰² C. D. Wright, Personal Interview, 17 March 2005.



Pamela Winfield St. Gabriel, Louisiana

doc # 312197
dob: 11.25.64
pob: N. Kingston, RI
sentence: 5 years
work: floor worker
Easter Bunny
Children's Visiting Day
LCW 4.14.00

Fig. 32. Spread Twenty-three from *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*. Courtesy of Twin Palms Press.

sign reading, “Pamela Winfield.” One ear flops forward, and the painted-on eyelashes give the bunny’s face a look of surprise and wonder. The reader knows from Luster’s opening essay that many of the inmates chose to pose in costume and has grown used to Halloween, rodeo and Mardi Gras costumes in the previous portraits. But Pamela Winfield is the first prisoner photographed covered by such a costume. What is underneath the bunny suit? The dissonance between the photographed reality and the prisoner who resides beneath is surreal, establishing the visual and cognitive discord with which the reader will read the lines of the poem on the next spread.

On spread twenty-four [Figure 33] the poem begins in a place we all know, lulling the reader into a temporary reprieve: “Saturday night/Going to Walmart/Satisfaction guaranteed.” The white space that follows reinforces the reprieve, until: “Over six trillion served, two million put away.” The juxtaposition of this most profound example of the capitalist impulse and the unfathomable number of human beings our prison system has locked away jolts the reader back into the surreal. Is there a link between capitalism and incarceration? Have we really incarcerated two million? The poet comments, “It gets old” and on the same line after a half inch of white space, “the way we do things.” Wright is indicting our society’s traditions of incarceration and greed, specifically, but she is also indicting the human compulsion to fall back on traditions because they are easier to follow than to question. When she indicts traditions, Wright invites us to revisit the portrait of Pamela Winfield, who is cloaked from view by tradition, which adds a sinister undercurrent to the innocent-looking bunny costume. Just as we must rethink the implications of foot washing earlier in the book, so must we rethink the implications of

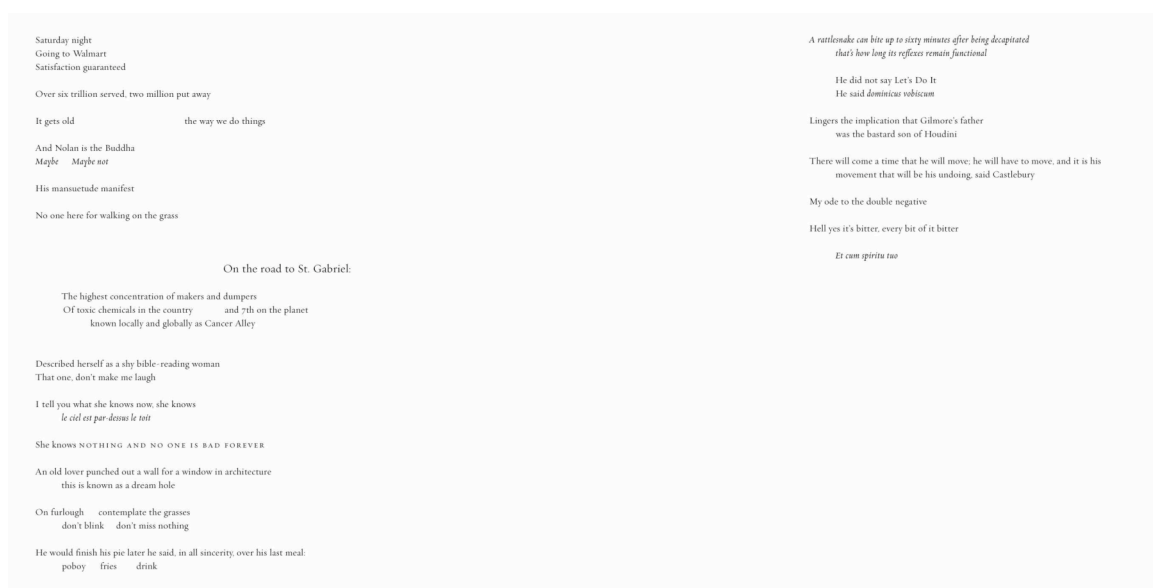


Fig. 33. Spread Twenty-four from *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*. Courtesy of Twin Palms Press.

other traditions in our society, whether religious or secular. Wright complicates the links between incarceration, greed, and tradition further in the next section of the poem, subtitled “On the road to St. Gabriel” and beginning, “The highest concentration of makers and dumpers/Of toxic chemicals in the country and 7th on the planet/known locally and globally as Cancer Alley.” Wright connects forms of harm—tradition, incarceration, capitalism, toxic dumping—with the implication that they allow us to remain blind to the harm they do. What link is there between the existence of a women’s prison so near to Cancer Alley? Together Wright and Luster suggest that there is a link and that the link exists because prisoners are dispensable, disappeared. Though we may not be able to know these people, Wright and Luster suggest that we should confront the fact that a willing lack of knowledge—of how our country’s prison system works, of how prisoners live—is yet another form of harm. *One Big Self* does not encourage a naïve belief that we can fully understand prisoners as individuals, but it does assert that the search for understanding, coupled with an awareness of its limits, is the most important of human pursuits, is indeed a moral imperative that Luster and Wright hope their art facilitates.

The rest of this section of the poem goes on to detail the surreal nature of prison life—a woman who knows “le ciel est par-dessus le toit,” that the sky is over the roof, even though the reader knows she can’t see it. Wright’s use of French and Latin throughout the poem serves to substantiate the alienation prisoners experience, while the following line, “She knows NOTHING AND NO ONE IS BAD FOREVER” reveals that despite this isolation, prisoners are often compelled to exercise more compassion than those of us free to observe the sky over the roof. The innocence with which Pamela

Winfield's bunny-clad face looks at the camera is reflected in the innocence of the condemned man five lines down: "He would finish his pie later he said, in all sincerity, over his last meal:/ poboy fries drink." The final seven stanzas of the poem on this spread enact, yet again, the visual and cognitive dissonance felt when viewing the portrait on the previous spread. The stanzas move through allusions without context—from random facts of science to an unnamed he who calls out to God in Latin to a reference to the career criminal Gilmore whose father was supposedly the bastard son of Houdini to the poet's own commentary ("Hell yes it's bitter, every bit of it bitter"), finally, cryptically, ending, "Et cum spiritu tuo."³⁰³

To offer an integrated reading of every spread in *One Big Self* would be the work of an entire book. Instead, I would like to extrapolate more broadly from the above two readings. The nature of the book design ensures the integrity of the sections of Wright's poem,³⁰⁴ and as a result, each spread presents a new opportunity to locate connections among the lines of the poem and the photographs. At the same time, the dispersal of fully integrated spreads among spreads that contain photographs only and spreads that contain text only implies that our readings should transcend the micro-level in order to consider the totality of the collaboration. Luster and Wright present quite different views of the prisoners of Louisiana. Luster's photographs, printed as they are on metal, obtain a tint of age that makes them reminiscent of early photographic tintypes. As such, they appear to be artifacts of a bygone era and risk seeming romantic or sentimental, but by pairing them with Wright's poem, Luster asks us to question the potential sentiment in the photographs

³⁰³ This Latin phrase is used in the Catholic mass in answer to the priest's words, "May God be with you." The response is, roughly translated, "And with your spirit."

³⁰⁴ C. D. Wright, Personal Interview, 17 October 2005.

rather than accept it as a romantic capturing of “the disappeared.” Prisoners posed in field clothes, standing before vast untilled fields, hark back to slavery, while at the same time costumes remind us that these people continue to live their lives. Luster’s portraits draw a thin line between past and present, remembrance and forgetting, absence and presence. Wright’s poem keeps us always in the present tense, and her persistent use of repetition works to defy the process of forgetting. Her use of disparate elements—epistolary form, listing, imagery juxtaposed with conversation—undertakes to embody the ways in which prisoners both serve out their sentences and attempt to maintain contact with the outside world. Unlike Luster, Wright is intent on exposing the hypocrisies of our system of justice balanced by examples of our increasing lack of mercy. It is the differences, finally, that matter more than the similarities. In their different media, Luster and Wright have collaborated to represent prisoners as people, as alive, embodied and speaking, and to provide an opportunity for us, who have locked them away and reduced them to statistics, to form connections, to reflect on our ethical complicity, to challenge our modes of acquiring and assessing knowledge. For Wright, it doesn’t matter how we read *One Big Self*, only that we read it,³⁰⁵ but how we read *does* matter, if we are to feel, as Wright does at the end of her poem, that we have gathered the prisoners around us.

Conclusion

Even before the book was published, and continuing to the present, Luster and Wright have exhibited their work in museums across the country.³⁰⁶ In museum

³⁰⁵ C. D. Wright, Personal Interview, 17 March 2005.

³⁰⁶ To date, they have exhibited at university museums, such as the University of Michigan and the University of Kentucky, state-sponsored museums, such as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Louisiana State Museum, private museums, such as the Jack Shainman

installations of *One Big Self* the photographs are presented in one of two ways. Originally the photographs were housed in a steel cabinet, designed by sculptor Kevin Kennedy.³⁰⁷ Visitors could open the cabinet's drawers and pull out the photographs, which were printed on metal with the information provided by each prisoner etched on the back.³⁰⁸ According to Wright, the photographs "are intended to be handled, held, kept."³⁰⁹ The reader of the book edition of *One Big Self* is denied this opportunity. The photographs cannot be lifted from the printed page, nor is it easy to ignore the title beneath each photograph, which provides, in most cases, the name or nickname of the inmate as well as his or her location. In the second iteration of *One Big Self's* museum presentation, the photographs are framed, hung on the wall, titled simply with the inmate's correctional number. Luster believes that "the photographs are about remembering individuals."³¹⁰ Titling the photographs with correctional numbers forces the viewer to consider the disparity between our prison system's tendency toward effacing identity and our need as human beings to form connections, to understand. Luster says, "Each one of those numbers is someone with a story."³¹¹ Museum-goers can lift a telephone receiver from the wall and listen to portions of Wright's poem while looking at the photographs. Such installations may serve well to educate the public about the prison system and its

Gallery in New York City and the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and even at the Angola prison museum.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ *One Big Self* Spread 85.

³⁰⁹ C. D. Wright, "Collaborations Part 2."

³¹⁰ Humes D-1.

³¹¹ Ibid.

population of humans, but the book *One Big Self* goes beyond this admirable social purpose by yoking the photographs and poems together in a design scheme that requires readers to question the limits of understanding. The book does not promise us “the light” of knowledge any more than Wright can make that promise to the unknown prisoner to whom she addresses a letter midway through her poem: “No one promised you the light or the morrow” because “knowing...is not enough.” Instead, we are reminded that the work of seeking knowledge is as important as the end result, sometimes even more so.

Coda:

“I must lie down where all the ladders start

In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.”

W. B. Yeats³¹²

In *Picture Theory* Mitchell poses a question that underpins the necessity for studying verbal-visual collaboration: “The real question to ask when confronted with these kinds of image-text relations [i.e. conjunctions of words and images as seen in illustrated texts or in film, television, and theatre] is not ‘what is the difference (or similarity) between the words and the images?’ but ‘what difference do the differences (and similarities) make?’ That is, why does it matter how words and images are juxtaposed, blended, or separated?”³¹³ In verbal-visual collaborations how words and images “are juxtaposed, blended, or separated” matters because their integration, in terms of both how the integration was produced during the collaborative process and how the integration is presented, forces readers to actively renegotiate the boundary between word and image. By destabilizing or dismantling that boundary, verbal-visual collaborators call into question the purity of artistic modes suggested by Lessing’s binary distinctions and by so doing ask readers to reconsider how meaning is produced and what a work means. The assumed stability of the book form, in the case of the verbal-visual collaborations I discuss, works to heighten active renegotiation with imagetexts because, unlike in hypertextual manipulations of word and image, the renegotiation is not mechanized by a

³¹² William Butler Yeats, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner Paperback Poetry, 1996) 346-348.

³¹³ Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 91. Brackets mine.

hidden code. By asking readers to imagine and enact the dynamic elements of the “fixed” material page, verbal-visual collaborators who present their labor in book form require readers to be conscious of how they produce meaning as they read and, most importantly, to shift their attention from discovering a stable meaning to engaging in the process of producing meaning, even multiple meanings, that Johanna Drucker argues should be central to reading.³¹⁴

The material concerns pushed to the fore by imagetexts exert pressure as much on product as on process, which results in what rhetorician Susan M. Hagan calls “cross-modal meaning” generated by the complementary ways of thinking active in a blend of verbal and visual elements.³¹⁵ Since, as Mitchell points out, “all arts are ‘composite’ arts (both text and image),”³¹⁶ the integrated reading required by verbal-visual collaborations should not be limited to imagetexts. Particularly in the 20th and 21st centuries, poets write with an acute awareness of the materiality of language and of visual culture in general, whether they compose on the traditional page or in hyperspace, so critics of poetry should approach poems with as acute an awareness of the “composite” nature of language. Applying the principles of integrated reading to any poem can open new avenues for understanding how modern and postmodern poetry explores the expressivity of language by engaging visual culture in ways both traditional, such as ekphrasis, and new, creating poems that explore the cross modal meaning triggered by a blend of verbal and visual concerns. The idea behind integrated reading is to be open to how verbal and visual

³¹⁴ Drucker, “Graphical Readings and Visual Aesthetics of Textuality” 275.

³¹⁵ Susan M. Hagan, “Visual/Verbal Collaboration in Print: Complementary Differences, Necessary Ties, and an Untapped Rhetorical Opportunity,” *Written Communication* 24.1 (Jan. 2007): 73.

³¹⁶ Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 94-95.

elements interact, and to apply such an awareness to any poem, regardless of whether it is written in conjunction with visual art, is to investigate how visual culture, visual technique, and visual perception surface in and pervade what would ordinarily be approached as a verbal art.

To show how integrated reading can expand critical interpretation, I want to look at two poems in the first book by a relatively new poet, Bradley Paul, whose work is not written in response to or in collaboration with any specific visual art but is suffused with visual technique. The first poem, “People Looking at a Photo Album,” is a variation on the ekphrastic tradition of writing about the activity of looking at art, especially art in the museum. Replacing high art with the photo album, Paul positions his poem in the realm of personal ekphrasis, recalling Elizabeth Bishop’s ekphrastic response to art by her uncle or to pedestrian visual artifacts such as maps. The poem opens, “We were animated around the photograph,”³¹⁷ though Paul never describes the photograph, or any other photograph that might be contained in the album, as a photograph. Instead, in a departure from the usual ekphrastic acknowledgment of the distance between viewer and viewed, he effectively blends the two by turning lived life into a photograph, describing the intersections of active life and the still moment: the hovering of viewers around a photograph is equated to the pecking of birds at scattered birdseed, which recasts the photograph as ephemeral rather than permanent; “retreat” from the photo album is “episodic,” like still frames of random moments pressed together into a narrative; the day-to-day takes on the qualities of the photograph as “the scenery stalled/ from one year

³¹⁷ Bradley Paul, “People Looking at a Photo Album,” *The Obvious* (Kalamazoo, MI: New Issues Poetry & Prose, 2004) 19.

to the next.”³¹⁸ What causes the scenery to stall, not even able to move forward in episodes, is the banal pictorialism that the speaker attaches to it, as if he or she is viewing the world through the lens of a camera, hoping to frame a moment to remember—“That’s how it was with trees and so on:/ stray locust, ruptured seed,/ a dog with fish nearby.”³¹⁹

The act of living becomes synonymous with the act of looking at a photograph, and the dissonance felt when a multi-dimensional world is collapsed into a two-dimensional world creates an artificial life that can only be escaped by willingly exchanging the flaws in artifice (“I would say the light/ —the light stumbling on obtuse objects,/ the light on the brick/ and the fertilized field—/ was not what we wanted.”³²⁰) for the less beautiful and less permanent but more alluring flaws of lived life, represented as a room in which objects purposefully act (“in that room the radiator slumped/ to the cracked wall behind it.”³²¹) and change as a result of use (“a broken tumbler”³²²). In the chosen room memory is not an episode but is continuous, as things break down the longer they are used, rather than stalling, and as absence is marked by some kind of presence, in this case scent, rather than by remaining out of the frame (“the scent of the rosebuds/ was fresh along the sill.”³²³). “People Looking at a Photo Album” functions both as a traditional ekphrasis, by describing the world as seen through art, and also as a meditation

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Ibid.

on the way our culture has become inured to looking and being looked at, and to replacing lived experience with a stylized memory of experience. In this way it both celebrates the visual world and indicts the simulacrum with which we have replaced that world. Because “People Looking at a Photo Album” announces itself as ekphrasis, readers enter the poem aware of the need to consider the influence of visual art when reading. When a poem does not announce itself as ekphrastic or otherwise explicitly visually engaged, as with concrete poetry or digital poetry, readers can consciously expand their critical understanding of the poem by applying the principles of integrated reading.

Other poems in *The Obvious* expand on the ekphrastic mode by exploring the blurring of the made and natural world and by examining the act of looking, while a second kind of poem actually enacts the blurring of the made and natural world by self-consciously isolating words as created objects that can be visually transformed in ways that move beyond the traditional manipulation of typography and lineation. It is this second kind of poem that benefits most from being read with the principles of integrated reading in mind. In “Instructions on the Brain” Paul asks readers to allow visual perceptions to blend with words in order to create a conceptual imagetext. The brain acts as the page, the quantum field, the hyperspace, on which language is experienced, literally, as a composite art. Thinking of the images created in this poem as verbal rather than visual, as in a traditional reading, means that the poem remains flat on the page. Seeing the images in an imagined visual space, and asking how those images interact with the words, allows the poem to move as if in a quantum field. The poem’s opening

line is a command that resembles a computational prompt: “Enter a word or phrase.”³²⁴ The command is detached from context—we are not told to enter a last name or our favorite kind of fruit or a list of songs that have changed our life—and in that way it resembles a computer screen blank but for a blinking cursor. The lack of context is compounded in the subsequent lines, which offer a gentle nudge, “If you’re not sure, guess,” followed by the contradictory exhortation to “Be specific.”³²⁵ The poem asks its readers to start with nothing but impulse and to make nothing concrete. By using a visual strategy, asking readers to envision filling an empty space, that is conceptual rather than material, Paul suggests that words and phrases are the visible product of the synthesis of seeing and acting. The poem plays with its readers by initially proposing that this process of word production is easy, the result of filling in the blank with linked letters to create entities that exist outside of time and independent of each other: “Something close, something similar./ And use less memory./ It’s more efficient that way./ It’s faster.”³²⁶ As soon as the poet offers some possibilities for words or phrases (“Friend. Shape./ Alley. Mouth.”³²⁷), the reader recognizes the false promise of simplifying language production to the shaping of words.

Language is both spatial—it takes up space on the page in the form of letters and it takes up space in the mind through memory—and temporal—it is relational and dependent on accrual. The four words supplied by the poet, seemingly independent of each other, seemingly disconnected except by being placed in close proximity within the

³²⁴ Bradley Paul, “Instructions on the Brain,” *The Obvious* 69.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Ibid.

poem, immediately trigger a visual image that yokes all four words together: “The streetlight orange behind her./ The orange of her breath unfurls./ Now I remember. Now I remember.” The alley becomes the setting for a memory in which the breath from a friend’s mouth, lit by streetlight, takes both shape and color. The immediate juxtaposition of the four words with the image plucked from memory asserts that the individual shape and meaning of words are inseparable from the collective web of associations within which they reside in the brain or on the page or computer screen. The blend of the visual letters, the semantic meaning of words, and the visual images they conjure become the generative engine for creating meaning. One visual memory triggers another until the poet repeats, “I remember now.” The slight spatial shift of “now” from the beginning of the sentence to the end produces an important semantic shift that indicates a movement from surprise (“Now I remember”) to certainty (“I remember now”) that is undercut by anxiety about the inability of the brain to stop making associations once it begins. The poet ends, “I am sure I want to quit.”³²⁸ “Quit” is a surprise in the context of memory and disrupts expectation by sounding enough like “forget” to suggest that might be the more appropriate word. To quit thinking is to quit using words and images, and that would effect a much more radical change than would forgetting. Why is the speaker sure about quitting? Or is the speaker sure about wanting to quit? To quit producing the cascade of verbal and visual stimuli that create meaning might seem a relief, a respite from the frenetic activity of the quantum field.

The work of integrating the verbal and visual is constant and shifting whether in the brain, on the page, or on the screen. The most promising aspect of digital media is the

³²⁸ Ibid.

opportunity to make the process of integration more transparent, even if that possibility has only just begun to be explored.³²⁹ Just as the Modernists found themselves at the conversion point of increased interest in the relationship of poetry and visual art and new technological possibilities in printing processes, so too do we now find ourselves at a point of conversion, between new interart forms and technological possibilities that seem to threaten the end of print culture. Jerome McGann points out that the situation in which the Modernists found themselves is now seen as “the signs of a culture-wide effort for the technical means to raise the expressive power of the book through visual design.”³³⁰ McGann argues that a similar circumstance may be true now, that the technological possibilities brought about by the digital revolution offer us new means for understanding the expressive power of the book. Poetry on the web has proliferated, and web design seems to be a natural outlet for forms such as concrete poetry. McGann proposes that “hypertext, unlike the book, encourages greater decentralization of design. Hypertext

³²⁹ In his contribution to *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies*, “Digital Poetry: A Look at Generative, Visual, and Interconnected Possibilities in its First Four Decades,” Christopher Funkhouser notes that for the most part the digital poetry being produced on the web has not yet explored new techniques: “Mechanically it is true that a contemporary poet has novel technology at her or his disposal, but critically speaking, many poems available on the WWW cannot be classified as ‘new’ because the digital techniques used to present them were cultivated in the decades prior to the WWW. Furthermore, investigations such as Glazier’s *Digital Poetics* prove digital poets have largely conceived these works with the same poetic and theoretical practices used by artists who worked with nothing more than paper and ink. The high-tech composition and presentation of poetry, using the latest available means, has, of course, reflected a sense that something innovative was under way, and many artists working in the pre-WWW period can rightfully claim that they were doing something mechanically original. This is obviously true in terms of surface aesthetics — particularly the development of kinetic works — but nothing particularly new has emerged since the initiation of the WWW. Contemporary digital poetry essentially refines earlier types of production and disseminates works to a wider audience via the network.” Christopher Funkhouser, “Digital Poetry: A Look at Generative, Visual, and Interconnected Possibilities in its First Four Decades,” *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies* ed. Susan Schreibman and Ray Siemens (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008). www.digitalhumanities.org/companionDLS/

³³⁰ McGann 62.

provides the means for establishing an indefinite number of ‘centers’ and for expanding their number as well as altering their relationships. One is encouraged not so much to find as to make order—and then to make it again and again, as established orderings expose their limits.”³³¹ While I do not disagree with this point of view entirely, I believe that verbal-visual collaborations not only provide the same means for decentralization as hypertext but that they demand a reader’s attention to the totality of a text in ways that hypertext does not.

How we “juxtapose, blend, or separate words and images” matters, on the screen or on the page, because those processes are fundamental to our ability to create and represent meaning. It matters because in “Instructions on the Brain” the speaker’s desire to conjure a word, pure and isolated, cannot be fulfilled. It matters because, as Yeats reminds us, we begin in the material world, where words and images both start as foul rags and bones out of which we create art.

³³¹ Ibid. 71.

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Leonard Baskin Collection, British Library, London