

# The Back Room

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How I Now Remember Then

Steve Benson

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In summer 1976 Carla Harryman and I moved from our Miracle Mile apartment in Los Angeles to Hampshire Street in the Mission District. I stayed on in our Victorian's airy second floor, with other flatmates, for a few years after we separated and I came out as gay. Then I moved into a Noe Valley apartment for two years with three women I hadn't known before, then with Johanna Drucker and two of her friends into a converted Piggly Wiggly warehouse near Lake Merritt. We each had spaces to use as bedrooms and studios, their walls (if any) easily repurposed when we chose. Johanna and her friends had finished a central area's dance floor to a varnished gleam, on which Carla and I later rehearsed improvisatory performance activities, anticipating, maybe, live shows we might do. I spent fifteen months away beginning in 1984, mostly in Catalonia and Andalusia, and came back to find a ground-floor solo apartment on McKinley near Berkeley High School, where I felt especially at home.

Kit Robinson and Alan Bernheimer, good friends of mine from college, had been in San Francisco a few years, forgoing any MFA enrollment.

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Carla and I had met Barrett Watten when he and Kit visited us in Goleta around 1974, and these three friends served us as links into a further set of friends and acquaintances who wrote diversely against the grain of literary conventions and were often called “language poets” by the end of the decade.

This milieu felt far friendlier, more fun, and intellectually engaging than the scenes we had found in Los Angeles or my U.C. Irvine MFA program. Poets took walks in the hills or on the streets, alone and together, explained and shared connections and activities, traded books and manuscripts, and had parties with beer, smoke, and dancing to the latest loud classic rock. Those who had jobs worked part-time or casually, temporarily, as writing and its life were the careers that counted for us, and expenses were cheap. Through Chuck Korkegian, the husband of Rae Armantrout, Ron Silliman’s old friend from San Diego, I got hired to work part-time at a B. Dalton’s bookstore in a mall south of the city, my income low enough to afford me psychotherapy and dental care through Medicaid.

A network of mutually sensible friendships developed rapidly and easily. We all seemed serious about writing and enjoyed it undefensively, welcoming fresh attention and possibilities as well as criticism. Any gravity was complicated and kicked by irony, amusement, and imagination. We set the question of whether we were making work anyone else could benefit from against our underlying

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curiosity and ambition to have fun while doing something meaningful in a ground-breaking way. To exercise and clear more space for freedom.



Tom Mandel, Carla Harryman, and Rae Armantrout at Terminal Concepts. Photo: David Highsmith.

I was immediately writing more freely, galvanized with often baffled interest in its meanings and impacts, its enigmas and experiments. How does my writing work? How does anyone's writing actually work? What makes or destroys meaning? We had a lot to talk about, and we had a lot to try along the way.

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Hanging out one day at one of our apartments, Kit, Bob Perelman, and I began to goof on composing while hearing other people's work. We quickly made a game of one person reading aloud from any stack of published writing, switching pages or books on impulse, while the other two took down words and phrases from dictation on separate typewriters, unable to keep pace, making new sentences from what we caught, and thereby reaping wildly different and sometimes hilarious verbal tracts with narrative, lyrical, and philosophical elements. Joining several times to exercise this possibility, we each came away with a stack of pages not plainly attributable to any one of us and too chaotic, it appeared, to put into print as is.



Steve Abbott, David Highsmith, Tom Vietch, and Tim Jacobs. Photo: David Highsmith.

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We could undertake this and other kinds of collaborative woodshedding and performance without credentials and training. Musical, theatrical, or graphic, group or solo, all were committed on a shoestring. They did make a splash, for us, as if a warp in time. We made our own freely distributed chapbooks and magazines by stapling photocopies together. NEA grants and family support must have financed the presses that made perfect-bound trade paperbacks. Ron compiled a set of texts as a circular, for each person in a list on the envelope to read through and pass to the next poet listed.

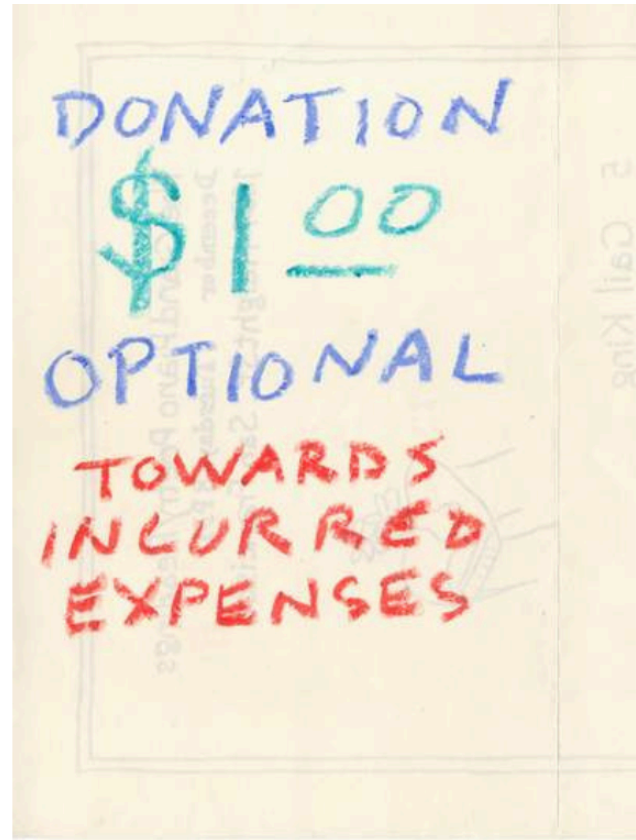
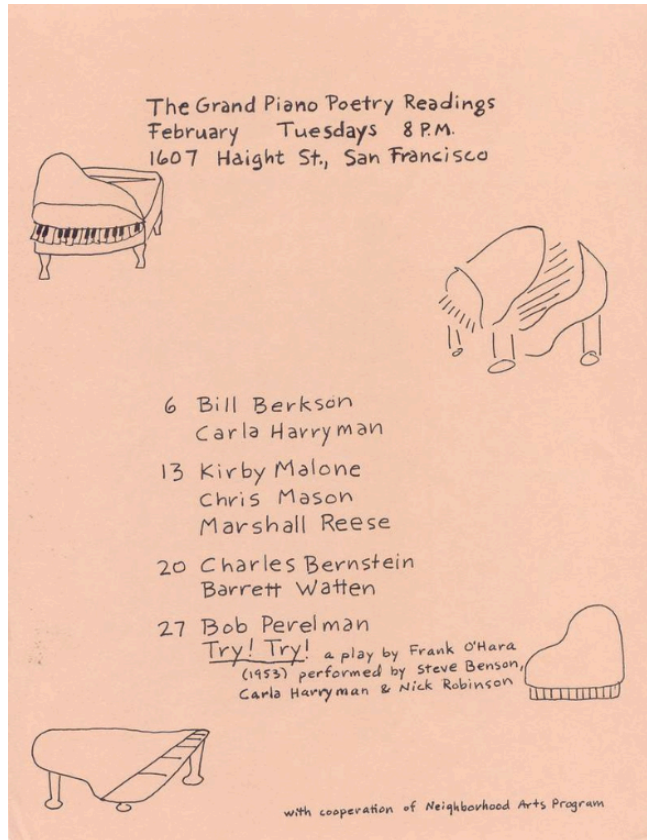
We came to readings every few days to hear something new, to socialize, to be provoked, to dream awake. Readings most anywhere in the Bay Area cost a few dollars or nothing at the door. Free, basically, if you could walk to get there. They'd start at least fifteen minutes late. Audiences were sociable, as if at a party. Introductions were short and sweet. Poets might read anywhere up to an hour or so. Listeners could come late or leave early, without giving offense.

In 1977, Carla and I inherited curatorship from Rae and Ted Pearson for the weekly readings at The Grand Piano on Haight Street, passing it on to Steve LaVoie and David Highsmith fifteen months later. The Grand Piano was a café by day, run by an anthroposophist who'd had the interior painted pale blue and allowed our evening readings rent free. I don't think we ever met. Carla and I designed and printed posters, watched the door, welcomed new faces, introduced the readers,

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cleaned up spills, and ushered people out within a half hour of each night's conclusion. We arranged an opaque projector to screen Larry Eigner's typescripts on the wall while he read them aloud. Carla, Nick Robinson, and I performed O'Hara's one-act *Try! Try!* there in 1979. We blocked our scenes, memorized our lines, and worked out our tones and rhythms for delivery.



Left: Archival flyer for readings at The Grand Piano, Right: A note written on the back of a flyer for a reading at The Grand Piano suggesting donation. Photos: Alan Bernheimer.

Poets who considered themselves or were seen by others as “language poets” were clearly a minority of readers in the Grand Piano Series,

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twenty-seven out of one-hundred-and-two during the time we organized these events. Twenty-four were women. (Higher education wasn't yet a strong presence; only two or three within that group worked then in academia. I worked in a chain of two used-books-and-records stores across the bay from 1977 to 1989.)

Other readings and related public events I liked to go to were held at Small Press Traffic, the Poetry Center at San Francisco State, Tassajara Bakery, Terminal Concepts, The Lab, Larry Blake's Bar, Moe's Books, Canessa Park Gallery, Talking Leaves Bookstore, S.F. Art Institute, Intersection for the Arts, New College, the annual Actualist conventions, and 80 Langton, which begat New Langton Arts. Langton included poets in its artists-in-residence programming, and paid other poets to write up accounts of the residencies' presentations. Lyn Hejinian and Kit interviewed poets who read their work on a KPFA radio show, In the American Tree. So poetry appeared in a variety of contexts, in performance opportunities not strictly confined to standing to read aloud from one's papers.

There were so many panel discussions that I was sometimes asked to appear on them. Neither I nor others knew what I could have to say. From 1981 to 1987 I joined in panels to address "Writers and Nuclear Issues" and later "Juxtaposition of Ideas" at Intersection, "The Poetics of Emptiness" at Green Gulch Farm, "Performance Writing" at the Out-Write Conference, "SpokenWord" at New College, and "What Do You Make?" at Langton, as part of Ted Berrigan's residency there.

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As well as I can recall (not well), for me these situations risked tedium, when discussions seemed to reiterate the obvious or get challengingly abstract. They risked muffled or dramatic interpersonal conflict, when egos and different values collided. I wanted to like them more.



Charles Bernstein and Steve Benson. Photo: David Highsmith.

In 1978 I advertised a course to be given in my apartment in the Mission, framed by discussion of works by six poets from Don Allen's *New American Poetry* anthology, all white males like me, half of them gay. I typed out some poems and statements by those writers to Xerox in a copy shop and hand out at our weekly meetings. Four or five strangers agreed to pay me \$65. I offered three credits from U.C. Extension.

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In 1977 Bob began curating a monthly talks series at the big Folsom Street loft apartment he shared with Francie Shaw, a year later moving it to 80 Langton. Each of us presenting would decide how to talk about a topic of our choosing, sometimes reading from an essay written for the occasion and fielding comments and questions as they arose, sometimes flooding the plan of execution. These attracted a variety of writers to listen and respond, while gaining some fuller sense of what each other had been thinking.

I thought of my first talk, in May 1977, called “Views of Communist China,” a little like a happening, a little like a local tv show — despite its title, which I’d thought of first, on impulse, and committed to. Rather than talking about China or political systems, I gave a personal walking tour of my apartment, having transferred as many decorations and belongings as I could into the Folsom Street space, perambulation with brief impersonations of contemporary Chinese speakers reported in a New Yorker article of the time. I recorded it, though I didn’t anticipate I would subsequently transcribe it, identifying all the interlocutors, Xeroxing and stapling fifty copies to give friends, as I did with a few other new writings. A year later I talked about “Careers in the Arts,” working from questionnaires I’d had filled out by a number of friends and file cards I’d jotted ideas and concerns on.<sup>2</sup> In 1980 I talked about “Close Reading” by guiding attention around other writers’ two-page spreads I’d photographed, projected as slides onto the Langton wall.

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Greg Goodman, Eileen Corder, Lyn Hejinian, Steve LaVoie in *Third Man* by Carla Harryman. Photo: Alan Bernheimer.

In 1978, six of us were working on rehearsals of Zukofsky's "A"-24, to study not only this text, (which enacts permutations from his other texts, as arranged by his partner Celia), but how to work and play together. We became dedicated, showing up reliably for rehearsals at Lyn's house in Berkeley. We focused on accuracy and clarity, didn't bicker much, and didn't get too sick to perform both times we'd scheduled (at The Grand Piano and at U.C. Davis). Bob played the Handel harpsichord parts on piano, while four vocal tracks ran simultaneously, all according to the published score: Kit reading Thought lines, Carla and I reading Drama, Lyn reading Story, and

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Barrett reading Poem. This closely collaborative experience built confidence in our *us* as dynamic and sustainable, inclusive of our differences and capable of group enterprises we could pull off with dignity, enjoying them as rigorous play experiences.

In the late seventies, the “language poets” became sufficiently defined by a mesh of ambitions, ideals, judgments, and friendships to become notorious if not always comprehensible or valuable to other writers. Interpellated by critiques from others in print, I realized I seemed to belong to an artistic “movement,” jarring and offensive enough to enter history in some way I couldn’t better understand than I did the rise of Dada, Fauvism, punk, or New Wave cinema. Anyway, this wasn’t the same thing.

What was it? Not a uniform style or formal criteria. Some mutual affinity embraced by people showing up with interest. We became friends. Belonging and membership are two different ways of seeing things. Belonging, I feel, depends on affiliation and affinity and time shared with a group, while membership has more to do with explicit reciprocal identification.

I was twice invited to join in cooperatively authoring public statements on what language poets stood for (or against). In our efforts to clarify an evidently muddled reputation, we hoped to address the social and political implications of this set of writers we might represent, to make

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some underlying group assumptions explicit without prescribing stylistic or aesthetic approaches. A sense of solidarity among ourselves was sought and queried in the process, while we hoped for more reality-based criticism from those we had felt stereotyped by.



Dress rehearsal for *The Alps* by Bob Perelman. L to R: Kit Robinson, Nick Robinson, Philip Silverstein, Kathleen Frumkin. Set design: Francie Shaw. Photo: Alan Bernheimer.

For the French poetry journal *change*, Lyn chose five collaborators in 1981 (Charles Bernstein, Ron, Carla, Barrett, and I) to introduce a collection assembled by the Greek poet Nanos Valaoritis.<sup>3</sup> A few years later, six of us (Ron, Carla, Lyn, Bob, Barrett, and I) drafted “Aesthetic tendency and the politics of poetry,” another lengthy

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public statement which *Social Text* published in 1989 as “A Manifesto.”<sup>4</sup> Each of us had written one sixth of the text on a given subtopic, and we edited as a group.

These texts addressed different dimensions of our values and intentions, generalizing about our orientation to writing at that time. For instance, an open conception of self was valorized, as opposed to a unitary, established, and unquestioned sense of self. We argued for acknowledging writing as deliberately artificial, constructive work reflecting concerns and principles, and against styles of speech as any guarantor of authenticity or sincerity. Theory was championed as worthy of close pursuit. We emphasized collective group activity (rather than personal identification with demographic or social groups) as strategic in developing new poetics.

Language poetry never kept a membership roster and didn't attribute credentials or authority to anyone. This, of course, allowed anyone to assert expert judgment or guiding principles. Language poetry was declared dead a few times after 1980. Each writer continued friendships and writing, gradually finding other connections as well. No one gave up on growing as a writer.

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Ted Pearson and Steve Benson. Photo: David Highsmith.

Bay Area poetics has long fostered collectivity, contention, and iconoclasm, along with informal soirees and peculiar theatrical projects. All this set a precedent for how my peers and I found ourselves and one another. Integrating the personal with the political was certainly a characteristic intention across diverse writing demographics. In feminist women's writing, lesbian and gay writing, new Black writing, and other informal groups of association, formerly marginalized communities affirmed their own significance, pushing to know and strengthen their memberships and their internal varieties and contradictions through their writings.

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These collective blocs found limited initiative and strategy for conjoining their interests and projects with one another's, even while some personal relationships between members of seemingly diverse groups did find traction. The Marxist Study Group, convened over several months in 1978-79, was a deliberate effort to address this welter of missed opportunities. The group met periodically in a back room at Small Press Traffic to study Marxism and discuss our understandings of its literary theory and possible implications for our time.

SPT, at 3599 24th Street, supported a great variety of poetries through its reading series and bookstore. To me this seemed like an unpressured neutral ground, encouraging connections and curiosity. I recall as fellow members Kathleen Fraser, Denise Kasten, Ron Silliman, Abigail Child, Steve Abbott, Robert Glück, and Bruce Boone, who convened us in the first place. Denise was then director of SPT; Kathleen went on to co-create *HOW(ever)*, an online feminist journal of experimental poetics; Steve, Bob, and Bruce were soon to be among the founders of New Narrative writing; Ron had a long-term activist and service relationship with leftist politics. He and Abigail and I could be counted as language writers. This small cadre of six or seven adventurous poets notably included no people of color and no one younger than twenty-five.

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Publicity photo for *Third Man* with Kit Robinson, Greg Goodman, Eileen Corder. Photo: Alan Bernheimer.

After a few meetings and before we had talked over all the proposed reading, the group collapsed in reaction to arguments over how to align Marxist analyses with our literary and social praxis. Orienting current writing toward revolutionary political ends proved explosive, failing to integrate personality differences, manners of speech, and dissimilar social and political backgrounds toward a mutually tolerable reciprocity of discussion. I was gun-shy and naive politically, and I couldn't talk or think well in a fracas over this or that resolute position. Having bypassed SDS meetings in college, I hadn't much foundation for argument or delight in disputation.

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At public talks and conversations heard around other events, sometimes aggressive banter and outspokenly reactive remarks alienated poets of in-groups and outside them. Such intensely contentious behaviors often dismayed and repelled poets with an interest in issues who yet had no axe to grind, while attracting a blood-sport curiosity from others. Strong, outspoken poets emerged as evident leaders, without necessarily meaning to or deserving such a gloss. In any case, I didn't find myself building skills to make my work *politically* effective; I had no solid argument against it, but I guess I balked at instrumentalizing my writing in any particular, responsible way at all. I resisted at my core making it “good for” something.

For me, then, the Marxist Study Group succeeded as an opportunity to get acquainted with poets who mattered to me. Over time after that, I was gladdened to get to know Bob and Kathleen, visiting them at home or a café for nuanced, plain-spoken discussions about our observations, readings, enthusiasms, tastes, principles, vulnerabilities, goals, quandaries, social roles, and current analyses. It was easy to muster the mutual respect and interest wanted to bridge our social and demographic identifications given our political, ideological closeness. Space opened for friendship.<sup>5</sup>

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Steve Benson, Eileen Corder, Tom Mandel in *Particle Arms* by Alan Bernheimer.  
Set design: Johanna Drucker. Photo: Alan Bernheimer.

Kit's younger brother Nick and his then-partner Eileen Corder came to town around 1979. They were oriented by training and enthusiasm toward minimal-cost, nonprofit experimental people's theater. Carla and Eileen both wrote plays they'd like performed. All the players were poets, not all language poets. Nick trained and directed us toward dynamically active, imaginative physical and vocal performances in the little Studio Eremos in a former factory south of Market. I acted in Carla's second play *Third Man* in 1980 and Alan's *Particle Arms* in 1982, each running a few nights. In 1983, I directed Carla's *La Quotidienne* at Langton. I felt these shows were magnetic and striking, intermittently enigmatic and hilarious to the poets and friends who filled the seats.

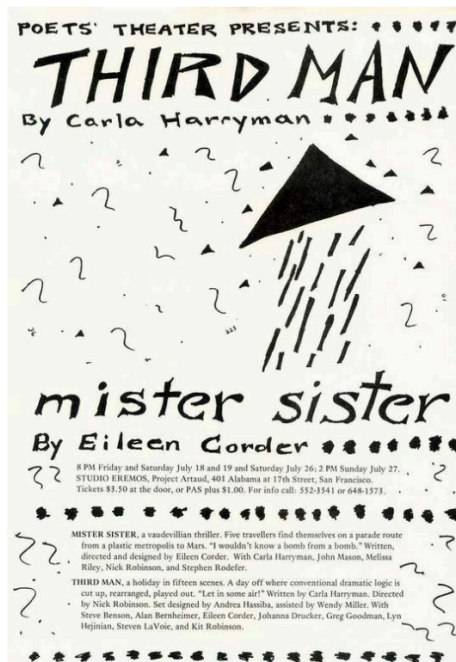
I got a plum part as an arrogant, reflective, goofy monologist in *Third Man*. I got to invent costumes, gestures, intonations, rhythms.

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I parsed out gushing, inscrutable soliloquies, mercurially, irrepressibly expressive. I memorized and played with my overelaborated orations. Gradually the rhythms and moves became second nature. My choices engaged decisions that precipitated further choices large and small in public among assembled witnesses. Real or show, or both at once?

Like “A”-24, the talks series and poets’ theater were active, demonstrative interventions, intended to matter, somehow, to lead to unpredictable developments yet more surprising and cohesive, setting up chains of reaction impossible to anticipate. That’s how I understood them: their purpose, perhaps, was to generate still greater curiosity, inspiration, exploration, and freedom, both for groups and individuals.

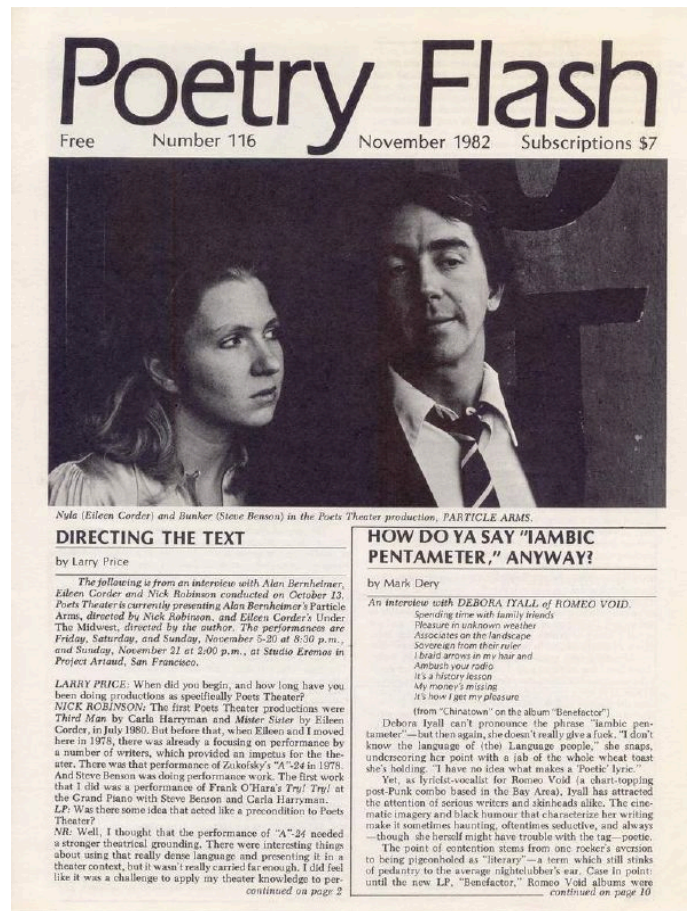


Left: Archival flyer for *Third Man* by Carla Harryman and *mister sister* by Eileen Corder. Right: Lyn Hejinian, Eileen Corder, Steve Benson in *Third Man*. Set design by Andrea Hassiba. Photo: Alan Bernheimer.

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Poets then corresponded a lot by mail, much of it rapid-fire, often close, passionate, risk-taking. This was mostly prior to the internet, to cell phones, to artificial intelligence, or so it seemed. I wrote a few reviews of friends' newly published books, to appear in *Poetry Flash* or *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* or other places. What was published in *Poetry Flash* mattered because it got around locally and fast, as a free paper (also available by subscription for eight dollars a year, in 1987). A copy from that August I've held onto is comprised of twenty 11 1/2 by 15-inch pages, including five pages tightly packed with announcements of each poetry reading or related event around the greater Bay Area for the month. (Plainly, such activity didn't die out every summer.) Another five full pages worth of paid display ads for books, readings, and events are distributed through this issue, which also features commissioned guest articles, two letters to the editor, one lengthy review and several shorter ones of recent books, and commentary on local readings. Explicitly so or not, the publication regularly presented "criticism," hot, cold, normative, tendentious, or effusive. Anyone could find it stacked in bookstores and cafés, pick it up with no commitment, and get more informed.



Poetry Flash, November 1982.

I find in this file a typed 1978 letter of two pages from a poet I had not previously read and didn't otherwise know, objecting to my recent letter to him. I had plainly tried too hard to explain my not accepting his offer to read in the Grand Piano series. After reading through his writing sample, I had objected to a tone of smugness, a characteristic that he also identified in my own letter to him. "I didn't ask you for advice or an evaluation. I mean, who are you to assist me? But I'll respond with some advice of my own, for your enlightenment." He felt my BS followed a therapeutic model. I feel confused now, trying to track the press of recommendations and reprimands in his letter. At that time I felt annoyed and ashamed.

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But my experiences of correspondence in this period were almost always courteous or friendly, and often encouraging. I was capable of being unexpectedly critical of friends' writing, or of proposing alternative readings. Over time, I learned not to advise or critique someone's work unless invited to.



Publicity photo for *Third Man* with Steve LaVoie and Steve Benson. Photo: Alan Bernheimer.

It got hard to stay as active in the poetry scene once I began a doctoral program at the Wright Institute in 1988. Changing jobs led me to hang out with other poets, including Bob Grenier and Ben Friedlander, then

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proofreading nights in a downtown San Francisco law firm. Between incoming documents, we could talk, write, and daydream. I left the Bay Area in the summer of 1992, storing many boxes in an Oakland warehouse and driving cross-country to complete a one-year internship near Boston, on the path to becoming a psychologist. Abruptly, my familiarity with Bay Area poetry activity deactivated.

The Bay Area experience had been at first a dream come true, a fairyland to learn through finding my space there. After a year or two, it became more *home* than I'd ever felt another world to be. Or I felt more at home, enlivened by reciprocities of performance and attention. I expected to return after the internship. But I didn't. My life took a turn into another kind of home.

1. . My more detail account of “Views of Communist China” as an experience can be read [here](#). Rebecca Couch Steffy has an interesting discussion of it in a 2020 paper from *Journal of Modern Literature*.

2. . A recording a transcript of “Careers in the Arts,” as well as the questionnaire used in research, appear [here](#).

3. . The text of th introduction by the six writers appears [here](#).

4. . The text “Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry” appears [here](#). A brief discussion of its history in print is [here](#).

5. [The Small Press Traffic School of Dissimulation,](#)” by Kaplan Harris, details some context and relations in the Marxist Study Group in greater detail.

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*Lead Image: Publicity photo for Third Man with Alan Bernheimer, Steve Benson, Eileen Corder, Lyn Hejinian. Photo: Alan Bernheimer.*

Small Press Traffic is a Bay Area seedbed for poets who push boundaries in the arts. We present programs, publications, and curatorial opportunities with an ethos of radical inclusivity. Committed to this mission since 1974, we highlight diverse, multidisciplinary, and intergenerational practitioners in our public programs, and prioritize equity, accessibility, and collaboration in our working model. SPT also stewards an archive of small press material produced and circulated in the Bay Area over the last half century.

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