

[THIS ISSUE](#)[ALL ISSUES](#)[TALK BACK](#)[MUSE](#)[IATH](#)

PMC home

To Write Within Situations of Contradiction: An Introduction to the Cross-Genre Writings of Carla Harryman

Laura Hinton

City College of New York

laurahinton@earthlink.net

© 2005 Laura Hinton.
All rights reserved.

1. One of the most innovative and sometimes overlooked founding writers of the West Coast Language Poetry school is Carla Harryman, author of twelve books of poetry and cross-genre writing that includes poet's-prose, plays, and experimental essays. Her short classic pieces in collections like *Percentage* (1979), *Animal Instincts* (1989), and *There Never Was a Rose without a Thorn* (1995) reveal a commitment to cross-fertilizing literary genres, interweaving theory and fiction, prose and lyric, satire and dialogue, in a way paralleled perhaps only by Kathy Acker. Harryman's more recent works like *Gardener of Stars* (2001) and *Baby* (2005) continue to build an aesthetic based on the blurring of conventional genres and literary boundaries, creating a non-categorizable mode of writing Ron Silliman has called the "inter-genre": a radical prose-poetry disengagement from Romantic lyric or bourgeois "realism" in favor of a fantastical utopian language of desire.^[1] But perhaps Harryman's most unusual contribution to the Language movement and to postmodern literature at large is her work in Poet's Theater. A leading figure of the San Francisco Poet's Theater in the 1970s and '80s, Harryman has continued poetry-performance work past the new millennium, staging a series of avant-garde poetry plays that include the ambitious multi-media piece *Performing Objects Stationed in the Subworld* (2001/2003), and a new piece, *Mirror Play*, recently performed in Michigan and to be performed again this fall in Wels, Austria.
2. It is not a single genre or piece for which Harryman is known, however, but for her refusal to be typecast, for her writing's generic flexibility and poetic inventiveness as it "restages"--either upon a literal stage or through the medium of a literary text--hybrid writings that challenge and cross over formal representational modes, sometimes engaging collaboratively with other artists and media in the process. (The 2003 San Francisco performance of *Performing Objects*, for example, brought together an artist and a musician, as well as a co-director and actors, through Amy Trachtenberg's art-installation-like costumes and sets and Erling Wold's songs.) Like most Langpo and experimental writings, Harryman's writings have been confined to the world of small presses and their distribution. Her inventiveness and challenge to the structural foundations of mainstream commercial literature have made her an icon among her Langpo colleagues for over three decades. She is beginning to draw a wider audience with several urban-performance incarnations of *Performing Objects* and by appearing internationally (this fall Harryman is delivering a series of lectures in Germany). The upcoming issue of *How2*, which plans to devote a special section to Harryman's work, attests to her increasing recognition.

3. One insufficiently discussed and--I would argue, essential--component of Harryman's writing is its relationship to feminist politics. Through her feminist and Leftist political roots, Harryman has striven to create a wide and liberal range of experimental venues, expressing and exploiting the potentiality of ideological freedom. But Harryman has also created, in the process, what I would like to call "an aesthetics of contradiction." In this introduction to Harryman's writing, I explore the ways in which Harryman's radical, non-genre-based writing practice is anchored to the feminist insight that literature itself must be unmade/re-made for it to begin to express women's symbolic experience in a patriarchal social-textual order, and to begin to express women's particular relation to cultural-artistic power. Harryman's aesthetics of contradiction, I argue, play upon tension, conflict, female "exclusion" from mainstream and masculine-coded discourses, and the artifice of aesthetic surfaces and "games," ultimately to reject the artifice of gender altogether.
4. In other words, Harryman's poetic writings function not so much to render literary objects beautiful (although sometimes they do so in the process), but to question radically the function of literature--poetics used against poetics, as a form of conceptual art. Like conceptual art, a multi-disciplinary movement conceived primarily in the visual-arts realm that has influenced Harryman greatly, these poetics do not just mold shapely lyrics or lines or phrases to be scanned or otherwise formally determined, but also insist that the audience reflect upon the nature of "poetry" and, in fact, *make* of poetry that which questions its own existence. In conceptually based literature like Harryman's, poetry acts as a conflictual, challenging medium, a discourse of "communication" that "fails" more than it communicates--that repeatedly replicates these failures as lack of linguistic or narrative resolution. In this conceptual aesthetics of contradiction, Harryman clearly draws upon postmodern theories that seek a conflictual as opposed to a unifying model of "meaning" or "narrative truth," theories like Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), whose challenge to *le grand récit* is appropriated for feminist purposes in Craig Owens's classic "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism" (1988) in a discussion of women artists' necessary relation to the avant-garde through their "exclusion" from male-based history and aesthetics, and exemplified by Acker's novels or by Cindy Sherman's fake photographic Hollywood stills. Poet Rae Armantrout also writes of the power of "exclusion" on behalf of women's experimental writing in her essay "Feminist Poetics and the Meaning of Clarity" (1992), articulating the role of conflict and contradiction as women artists face the symbolic order. Interdisciplinary volumes like *Feminism/Postmodernism* (1990) further open a dialogue in sociology, philosophy, literary studies, and science about this feminist engagement in conflictual models of epistemological engagement, making synthesis no longer a preferred mode of inquiry, as did *Conflicts in Feminism* (1990). More recently Judith Lorber argues in *Breaking the Bowls* (2005) that "gender cannot be a unitary theoretical concept, and the oppression of women cannot be a homogeneous political rallying cry"; she calls for "countermeasures to the effects of gender" that are "undoing gender" itself (xii-xiii). Megan Simpson has expressed this belief with regard to women's Langpo writings explicitly, in *Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women's Language-Oriented Writing* (2000).
5. An aesthetics of contradiction is at work in Harryman's text as a sign of political, personal, discursive struggle, a struggle that has marked her own path as an adventurous woman writer from the beginning of her career, who helped formulate the Langpo movement after leaving college in the late 1970s. In the interview that follows, Harryman admits that "the critique of gender when it comes to 'language poetry'" has yet to be written." While she applauds a feminist epistemology "that also critiques identity politics," Harryman looks back on her experience of living in the West Coast literary climate of three decades ago as

creating "different registers of experience and knowledge unreconcilable at this time," and admits, "writing within situations of contradiction was and remains an aspect of my work." In her experimental essay on motherhood, "Parallel Play," Harryman comments on "contradiction" as it inflects her aesthetic philosophy in general: "The goals of the writing are built on sometimes contradictory or competing claims, which manifest themselves in shifts of style and genre within individual texts" (122). She furthermore reveals here that "I want the claims to work themselves out transformatively" (122). She means, perhaps, that her aesthetics of contradiction is not meant to create opacity forever and remain oblique, but rather to shift the structural possibilities dialectically, and to offer, through creativity and art, previously unimaginable modes of language and thought.

6. Harryman's aesthetics of contradiction takes many forms, yet always emphasizes the artifice and also the conceptual underpinnings of art. One such form is "the game," that activity both artistic and sociological, which Harryman imitates, probes, and transforms in order to explore systematic and arbitrary constraints. The "game" is regulated by a series of tightly controlled rules that provide constraints to regulate the flow or trajectory of various literary devices, ranging from plot expectations to theatrical moves to imagery and symbols--or what might be said in a given social situation.[2] The role of competing contradictory languages that resonate--however arbitrarily--through the meta-language of the "game" becomes noticeably part of an aesthetics of contradiction in *The Words after Carla Sandburg's Rootabaga Stories and Jean-Paul Sartre* (1999), a series of cross-genre writings in which Harryman toys with implicit and explicit logical scenarios based on language games, board games, relationship games--all the "games" by which a pre-established ideological set of codes sets the direction of social discourse. Contradiction is the effect of the collision course that emerges when one set of rules vies for power over another. Harryman's play with the "game" of rules concludes, albeit circularly (and that's part of the "game"), that rules are arbitrary formations of structures of belief, never separated from "coherence" as imagined through language. Although another function of the "game" is to behave as if there are no other rules, it's only a game: the "game" is only binding--seemingly natural--within its own set of obligations and restraints.
7. Related to this concept of the "game" that permeates many of Harryman's writings is her textual relation to surface and performance, as opposed to narrative depth. An aesthetics of contradiction emerges within her writings as they prefer multiple postures and voices--seemingly both serious and parodic at once--and refute a subjectivity or psychological insight into any one "character" or "persona," coded as "singular subject," as is the tradition in realism or Romantic lyric. As a result of this multiple use of potentialities for subjectivity, Harryman's writings appear to value the surface of the text. They don't try for "Meaning" with a capital "M"; and it's not that "meanings" don't exist but that one set of meanings or an interpretative construct overlaps with another, offering contradictory possibilities. In works like *Percentage*, for example, as Chris Stroffolino notes, "the traditional expectations that poets have a locatable 'speaker' and 'situation' are discarded. Instead the acts of writing, thinking, and selecting are foregrounded," and a "stylistic disjunction" creates a surface that is not to be penetrated beyond the language/discourse itself (172). What Harryman achieves in this early chapbook will become a style that, to use her phrase, is always "in the mode of," never with a referential or outside "look" toward a universal realism. Her short piece entitled "Animal Instincts" in the collection begins with the announcement: "Out my window the view blocks what's behind it." This anti-Balzacian narrative is anti-photographic, anti-realistic, with no reference to objects delineated within space through a visual language. As a result of this loss, Harryman asks how one might advance through a narrative lacking visual desire:

In any case, I know that the village is neither square nor long, that science has specific status in private life, and that no one is aware of anyone's standards. Here the road forks and the mind cannot advance.
("Animal Instincts" 33)

8. Yet "desire" is concocted through another approach to narrative. It is literally re-made, not through the falsity of a smooth progressive description of objects in space within the linearity of story but through the humorously disjunctive, troubled, self-reflexive critique of a text about its own status as text. The problem, of course, with reading a Harryman text--and the kind of complex pleasure it provides--is that there is little platform to remain upon while "the road forks" and the narrative--like the mind--"cannot advance." Harryman, like many postmodern artists, takes a contradictory attitude. Yet, unlike the tradition of feminist avant-garde filmmakers, whose spokeswoman, Laura Mulvey, famously articulated in 1975 narrative's "sadism" through its linear "male gaze," Harryman prefers to *use* narrative--against itself. She declares in her short piece "Toy Boats," originally published in *Animal Instincts* and republished in *There Never Was a Rose Without a Thorn*: "I prefer to distribute narrative rather than deny it," thus contradicting the conventional binarism Mulvey identified between narrative and non-narrative writing. Harryman writes that narrative is not a mode of writing that should be dismissed, but used as its own witness: "Narrative holds within its boundaries both its advantages and defects. It can demonstrate its own development as it mutates throughout history" (*There Never Was A Rose* 2). Its mutating effect gives narrative what she declares to be its great advantage: "in accomplishing its mutability, it [narrative] achieves an ongoing existence" (2). As we use but also stand outside of narrative, we see that its framing structures include ourselves. Rather than reject narrative because of its tendency to employ the patriarchal "gaze," Harryman offers this insight: "Those who object to this artifice are narratives enemies," she writes, "but they, too, are part of the story" (2).
9. In contradictory motion, Harryman asks that we be both inside the "interior" of narrative and "outside," observing the artifice of narrative's potentially mutable and shifting surfaces at the same time. "Toy Boats" is one of the short inter-genre pieces in which Harryman refuses to resolve her aesthetic contradictions. In taking the form of a dialogue through multiple voices that challenge one another, she challenges both the idea that any one viewpoint prevails (Lyotard's "*le grand récit*" and the false and contradictory division between subjects, all too often masculinized and feminized in narrative as subjects and objects. Harryman takes an interest in the "object." She views it through the Hegelian dialectic, by which the object becomes a projection of the subject's need for ego-identification. She explores the object's status in great depth in *Performing Objects Stationed in the Subworld*, where "characters" take on and become part of an interaction not only with others (as objects), but also with various objects of play arranged around the stage--objects that are also remnants of a lost urban inner-city world: pipes, tires, tools, clothes lines and hanging laundry. The re-placement of the object into the subject's dialectic is central to Harryman's writing. She resists conventional narrative or lyric poetry's focalization on a single persona, character, or subject, in the interest of exploring the margins of subjectlessness and the value of "the other." And she focuses more on relational effects *between* "others" than on subjectivity as a monological effect. Of great interest to her is one's status as object, in works like *Baby*, as well: in families, communities, in art and in literature.
10. Harryman's interest in objects, and one's object-relation to gendered others, is comically rendered in a short piece entitled "The Male." This non-generic prose piece--is it a short story? is it an essay?--caricatures not any one person but cultural masculinity, while a presumably female "other" (as "writer") sits making pancakes and chatting with "the male" across the breakfast table. In this piece we

witness a version of masculinity as inarticulate, prosaic, disembodied, and wittily sentimentalized. (The "male" asks a question "that reminds me of masturbating while reading Wordsworth," we read.) The piece does not only study but literally enacts "the male's" gendered language: "The Male by nature prosaic, moving from one place to the next in an unrhapsodic way, thinking hard perhaps but communicating little, allowing his motions to speak for him, so that he was followed by a trail of his own making?" (*There Never Was a Rose* 143). This is a loaded sentence. "The Male" is "by nature prosaic" because "he" is not one to consider the ironies of the coded language, the "game" of gender communication, into which he is fit. The discomfort caused by reading such statements is replicated in "the male" when "he" lacks communication and defines himself in terms of silence. He "communicates little," because there is no exchange in this textual dialogue. There is "thought," but it is "naturalized" and made seemingly concrete to the "male" body--allowing his motions to speak for him"--which creates a symbolic "reality" that he may interpret as the "real," but it is "a trail of his own making," a chain of signifiers. The reader's frustration is articulated by an equally frustrated female figure-as-author: "I am just a person, I said to the Male, but you are not just a male" (146). She adds: "I don't know why I chose to present myself in this way to the creature" (146). While dismantling cultural masculinity in the same way as it was formed (like cultural femininity), "the male" is studied, eulogized, and, ultimately, denigrated, like "woman" as cultural sign. Here Harryman's feminist engagement is detached and comical in a way reminiscent of Jane Austen. Ultimately, however, unlike the psychological novels of Austen, a piece like "The Male" represents not a person but a cultural identity, a faulty emblem of an ideal--embodied perhaps, in social-textual life by actual men in domestic settings in middle-class households, but not a "true" flesh and blood person. "His" presence is a non-presence, a fetishistic signifier of a larger cultural value in which subjects and objects act too readily in ideological concert.

11. Harryman's aesthetics of contradiction often offer this kind of scathing social critique--one that is often much more difficult to trace or locate politically. Much of her writing, in fact, operates like social-political satire--but without the tragic "butt," without the missing ideal that gives satire its edge. Her brand of satire operates in the manner Fredric Jameson describes in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," through "pastiche." Jameson discusses postmodernism as a function of the "newly emergent social order of late capitalism," as a resistance to the high modernism, say, of a Joyce or Eliot, a Stravinsky or Frank Lloyd Wright, itself once a reactionary art that is now institutionalized by "the university, the museum, the art gallery network, and the foundations" (111). According to Jameson, two "significant features" of postmodern art exist, embracing rather than repudiating "consumer society" and the post-industrial electronic era dominated by the media and multinational corporations: both "pastiche" and "schizophrenia" (113). These features govern "the postmodernist experience of space and time respectively" (113).
12. While I may disagree with some of Jameson's assumptions about postmodern art and literature in general, I find that his definition of pastiche describes the kind of contradictory structure that inhabits much of Harryman's inter-genre work. Jameson distinguishes pastiche from parody, which he describes as "the mimicry of other styles . . . of the mannerisms and stylistic twitches of other styles" (113). Parody, a popular phenomenon in modern art and literature, is that which accentuates the "idiosyncrasies and eccentricities" of other styles, producing "an imitation *which mocks the original*" (113, emphasis added). Parody relies on the presence of an original, an acknowledged presence which audiences may hear, read, or see. It also structures an ideal for which readers may be nostalgic (in realism or satire), when the ideal end itself is seen as impossible or deflated. The effect of parody is "to cast ridicule on the private nature of these stylistic mannerisms and their excessiveness," suggesting, however, in the process, that

there might be a "way people normally speak or write" (113). Yet pastiche does not rely on the presence of an original or a normative expression--"the imitation of a peculiar or unique style," Jameson writes. Pastiche, instead, is "a neutral practice of such mimicry . . . without the satirical impulse, without laughter" (114).

13. Harryman's writing creates the satirical effect "without laughter." It is like parody, but a parody that "has lost its sense of humor" (Jameson 114). Or has it? Rather, Harryman's writing has lost its original referent. It may not be technically satiric. But it is pastiche-parody quite full of what is funny and absurd in gendered social life and texts. To understand Harryman's writings, one must embrace a unique sense of feminist humor. And one must revel in a sense of human incapacity and language's absurdity and take joy in contradiction. I believe that at the comic root of Harryman's writing is a deep pleasure in feminist-inspired contradiction, not only because contradiction un-does the gendered terms that structure language and world, but because it offers an alternative space for creativity and productivity, one based on openings rather than on closings. Harryman's productivity appears to be opening again and again.

An Interview with Carla Harryman

I. "The Formation of this Scene"

- LH: Can you go back in time and recall the origins of your aesthetic practice in the 1970s and early '80s West Coast experimental literary scene--your association with writers we now call "Language Poets"?
- CH: I was part of the formation of this scene. I had met Steve Benson in college in Southern California in 1971, and he had introduced me to Kit Robinson--who introduced Steve and me to Barrett Watten in 1973. Barry and Kit would visit Steve and me in Santa Barbara and L.A., where we moved in 1974, and we would visit them in San Francisco. Some of the time we passed doing collaborations on a typewriter while socializing: one person would sit down and type, and when he or she was done, the next would have a turn. The others sat around with beers and talked.

In addition to the poets and artists who informed my aesthetic practice, there was the post-Vietnam War climate, the grittiness, the revelation of histories of San Francisco culture, sub-cultural social fluidity, queer culture, an edgy political climate, an open public culture, low Bay Area rents and little money--all were very influential on the development of my writing.
- LH: Was there a particular individual who stimulated you to start writing in this particularly innovative way, in which creating semantic "sense"--traditionally speaking--is not the primary artistic goal?
- CH: Ron Sukenick, my instructor in college, would tell his students that W.H. Auden's best poems were written for sound or liveliness, not sense. Did I agree with that assertion? Perhaps not--but the assertion itself interested me. With this statement, I became immediately taken with the idea of writing for something other than sense. I felt that sense was too limiting in regards to what writing could do. So I tried to find out how to produce writing in which the writing itself was foregrounded. The associative, memory-based logic of Victor Shklovsky's *A Sentimental Journey*, which I read at this time, suggested to me that prose structures are actual thought. What fascinated me about the temporality of Shklovsky's book was the fact that "free" association was not free. The "freedom" of the writing is bound to the problematic of degrees of freedom and

un-freedom within human experience. I wanted to write something that had a kind of structural efficacy.

- LH: Were you drawn to this kind of logic of association and "structural efficacy" within literature prior to this period--even as a child?
- CH: When I was a little girl, I thought of writing as this kind of magical or sublime thing. I was interested in telling stories, but not stories about anything that was actually happening. I think I had the idea from a very young age that there was no reason to tell a story about an event already happening, that was already a "story." I had a few friends who wanted to write or wrote novels, and I was fascinated by their ambition; but I wasn't at all interested in the content of their books. I wanted to write what wasn't there in front of me.

My mother used to recite Blake and Shakespeare over the ironing board. "Tyger, Tyger" was amazing and ironing was boring. When she wanted us to exit the car more quickly, she would say, "Out, out brief candle." I liked the idea of being a brief candle, which translated into being swift. The associative concept always fascinated me.
- LH: When you began studying literature seriously in high-school and college, what authors most appealed to you intellectually and artistically?
- CH: John Ashbery and his work, *The Skaters*, showed me the wonder of surface. Later, a friend introduced me to Robert Creeley's *For Love*. This book opened up another path of thought, that of digression. This was the year of odd encounters: Creeley, Wittig, Eluard, left French politics, depressive romances, and important friendships.
- LH: Speak in more detail about these important friendships.
- CH: My friendship with Steve [Benson] encouraged my latent interest in performance. Writing itself became, through Steve's intervention, a kind of performance, especially in collaboration with other writers. The experience of on-the-spot invention, companionship, and edgy play at this time became important.

Barrett [Watten] was the "medium" through which I was introduced to the writing of Lyn [Hejinian], Bernadette Mayer, and Clark Coolidge. I can still see the manuscript pages of their works, as well as Lyn's early letter-press production of *A Bride Is the Thought of What Thinking*, passed around in Barrett's Potrero Hill apartment in San Francisco, where Erica Hunt and he were roommates for awhile. Erica, too, was an inspiring conversationalist. That was part of the culture of the times: poets talking.
- LH: Describe the gender politics that affected you as an emerging writer during the late '70s and early '80s on the West Coast.
- CH: There was certainly an open space for women writers, which I believe distinguishes our generation from earlier generations. But I think the critique of gender when it comes to "Language Poetry" has yet to be written. Megan Simpson's *Poetic Epistemologies* was helpful to me in understanding the larger framework of the gender issue, because she works with a feminist perspective that also critiques identity politics. I found different registers of experience and knowledge unreconcilable at this time. Socially, I experienced an engagement with left politics and a kind of unity. But the kind of aesthetic practice I was involved with did not gel into a unity. I would say that writing within situations of contradiction was and remains an aspect of my work.

II. "A World of Subjects Who Think of Themselves as Historical in New Ways"

- LH: Let's turn the conversation to more theoretical-aesthetic concerns--beginning with the very terminology one might use for writing based in "situations of contradiction," or a "difficult" writing. Such writing is often associated with the movements of "modernism" or "postmodernism." Do you make a distinction between these movements and/or the terms, as do many critics of twentieth-century culture? These terms themselves seem to me a site of contradiction and contestation.
- CH: Olsen's relationship to modernity is vexed. Williams's is progressively engaged. That's an example of a difference. Recently, I was reading Brian McHale's *Postmodern Fiction*. He claims that the "postmodern" in fiction is predominantly concerned with ontology, whereas "modernism" is predominantly concerned with epistemology. Lyn's [Hejiniian's] writing on Stein, I think, would support this view.

However, in art-theory discourse, the two terms would be reversed. In the visual-theory world, I would say that most people think about "modernism" as ontologically situated and "postmodernism" as about epistemology. Yet, always upon closer scrutiny, one yields to the other--these terms are not easy to stabilize.

"Modernism," as associated with modernity, gives of a world of subjects who think of themselves as historical in new ways. The modernist subject can make history. Also, history is not something that happened, that is happening, that is future oriented. The postmodern subject would have a more skeptical relationship to history, yes? What does that do for art?

I don't really buy discussions that attempt to simplify these terms or to claim that postmodernism is really just late modernism. The artist's intervention into periodization is very complex, because the present is always entailed. And the present also changes. And one must write in a present. We are living in a horrific new century under circumstances that perhaps one might have imagined but can only now experience. We now live in a time where citizens' voices are not heard, where the truth is stonewalled at every turn, and lies and criminality in government prevail.

- LH: I'm still interested in how you might use these terms, and how they would apply to your own writing. Some critics are using these terms "modern" and "postmodern" as a way of marking two distinct literary historical periods to the century; others are using them to mark aesthetic distinctions. For example, Stein, although she worked early in the twentieth-century and is historically associated with many "moderns," was, in fact, textually a "postmodern"--based on her aesthetic breakthroughs, her experimentation with time, with the sentence.

Some critics have written about "modernism" as a period when there was this nostalgia for beauty, or the romantic sublime (but as nostalgia, not timely "presence"). I am fascinated by the way in which your own work takes on a kind of postmodern version of the sublime, as it confronts utopia. Since "utopia" actually means "nowhere" or "no place," going back to Thomas More's book title, utopia is always an ironic place, a place that can't exist--a perfect (which is imperfect) postmodern world. Is there any form of modernist nostalgia in the utopias you work with? Take, for example, *Gardener of Stars*--there are you registering a desire for something lost, something better, connected to the sublime, in "nowhere," as word and concept?

- CH: Well, utopia means many things. It means "nowhere," an impossibly remote place, an impossibly better world, an ideal world and so on. In modern art, the "nowhere" presented asks for completion, and this entails irony: completion is the end of utopia. I am interested in Ernst Bloch's construction of the utopian emotion of hope, as he offers us a rich psychological and aesthetic reading of utopian desire. There are certainly utopian projects within modernism. I would include Stein and Breton in this.

For me, "nowhere" is a place to write into. It can be pretty bleak. *Gardener of Stars* conflates utopia and dystopia. I have been very interested in desire as a

future-oriented feeling generated by negative situations. Its positive value is in the capacity to revise the future, not through closure or finitude. *Gardener of Stars* ends with a comment about the wrecked city becoming a promise: "rose thorns, slack wicker, and collapsing fences arranged the city into a promise."

- LH: On the issue of the terminology we use to define this new mode of writing in which you and other Language Poets are engaged, I read an interview a couple of years ago of Charles Bernstein, in which he called into question the term "experimental" in reference to avant-garde writing practices. Others, as well, have questioned the use of that term. Why is that word so problematic? Would you, too, like to see a better word for this new practice or building tradition? Kathleen Fraser, of course, has proposed the word "innovative," and applied it specifically to many women's avant-garde practices. I guess the real question is: how does one categorize writing that works against traditional forms or categories? How do you personally explain to people what you do?
- CH: The word "experimental" has been disparaged by many people for many years. I understand why the term is disparaged. I also understand that in a world that has real literary divisions, the problem of how to cite what is non-mainstream--how to call that--is really problematic. People also complain about the term "avant-garde," and suggest that this word, too, is bad, that it associates "experimentalism" with militarism. But didn't Ghandi propose a peaceful army? I have been involved in an on-going project at Wayne State University in which we often use the word "new genre." This term also has its limitations.

I was on faculty panels at the Naropa Institute a couple of times, and there were three or four boring statements by really wonderful poets about why they did not like the word "experimental." I'm not sure the term is useful all the time, but it also sometimes seems rather like a straw horse. People get worked up about the relationship of language experiment to science experiment. The term "innovative," I think, comes with less baggage--it doesn't get people all nervous about "those experimentals." But there's also this other term used by writers like Kathy Acker: "the other tradition." When Barrett was doing a reading of Acker's work as it comes down through Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* [presented at New York University in the fall of 2002], he was writing a potential narrative for "the other tradition." That's an interesting construct which encompasses history--which isn't simply about a current practice.
- LH: Such a concept suggests that the kind of writing you do emerges from a solid if sometimes overlooked historical tradition. Is it possible that what some people call "postmodernism" is perhaps not historically isolated or unique--even if some contemporary readers feel "postmodern" experimentation is too difficult or opaque for them?
- CH: Yes, absolutely. Going back to your first set of questions on origins: some of my literary sources are in Rabelais--or Jane Austen.
- LH: Jane Austen?
- CH: Yes, Jane Austen. Really important. She's so funny.
- LH: I agree that she's unbelievably funny and very dry--the quintessential ironist. So many people don't experience that reading of Jane Austen, the way the irony and wit are so embedded in the narrative that there's actually no place to stand, although she manages to give this illusion of a realism in writing that became the nineteenth-century domestic novel or novel of psychological realism. In my opinion, Austen's "realism" in an ontological universe doesn't actually exist.
- CH: No it doesn't.

III. "Games are Interrogations of Restraint"

- LH: I'm thinking of Austen as a figure of ironic surface and yet disciplined restraint. You have written about the aesthetic of "restraint" in the essay you wrote for the anthology Cynthia Hogue and I co-edited, *We Who Love to Be Astonished*; the essay took up "restraint" in work by Hejinian, Acker, as well as one of your performance pieces. Could you re-articulate here your concern with this aesthetic practice? How does "restraint" bear a relation to your own work, in particular?
- CH: In the article, I try to explain that "*constraint*" would be any formal device that structures the writing of the work. A sonnet has rules, constraints. OuLiPo uses mathematical constraints. Hejinian uses constraints: in *Writing as an Aid to Memory*, the constraint was related to the alphabet. *Restraint* has to do with what holds the writing back from taking some other direction than the one it does take. So a restraint might have to do with what a device or constraint allows and disallows, with ideological limitations, with conceptual limitations, with choices.

In my writing for performance, I work with an open text, a text that is available to multiple interpretations and that, in fact, intensifies the capacity for performative work to be multiply interpreted. It requires both explication of the text and interpretive invention on the part of any ensemble. The work would not be similar production to production--ever. The limit, then, is that it can't be reproduced: each production becomes a unique object.

In general, much of my work questions the given, the posited, not only from the outside but also in regard to the writing itself. There are a number of works that I would place in the category of games. Some of them have that formal designation, and some of these are part of a collaboration with a visual artist. I came up with the concept "games" when I was writing *The Words: After Carl Sandburg's Rootabaga Stories and Jean-Paul Sartre*. Writing games have to do with references to conventional games, like board games and card games--but I'm also interested in conceptual games, political games, the games of hierarchy, other power games, language games, philosophical games, games of interpretations, and the game of the writing itself, which is a kind of performance game. Within any possible written game, a number of these kinds of games come into play. When they do, it's as if the hand has been given. Then one sees how the hand is to be played. A relationship made to composition becomes then an important aspect of the game.

Perhaps the games are interrogation of restraints. The first restraint is the given in language. The next restraint is what results from breakaway moves. There are lots of breakaway moves, trying to resist restraint.
- LH: I heard you read recently at St. Marks Poetry Project in New York, from your new work *Baby*. Going back again to this concept of "restraint," explain to me how this form of textual resistance affects the "game," so to speak, of this new work.
- CH: You could apply the notion of restraint to any open text, to see what the bounded ideological conflict is in the work. What would I say about *Baby*? The world of *Baby* blends realistic representation and irreality. But I guess the family is the most overt restraint. *Baby* is determined by the family as an ideological construct. There is no *Baby* without the family.
- LH: You mean the family body as social or figural?
- CH: Both. They are played with and against each other. *Baby* may imply critique but it does not dismantle the family.
- LH: In other words, the "Baby" you "play with," so to speak, is a figure upon which we are to sit in judgment against the bourgeois or "nuclear" family?

- CH: The family in *Baby* more closely resembles the biologically intertwined extended family. The tiger performs as a caregiver, a kind of metonymic object of caregiving that could be mother, grandmother, aunt--even "baby-sitter." But all of these roles are predicated on family/biological relations. It's the primary attachment that's important within the baby/tiger world, as this attachment is projected imaginatively and discursively.

IV. "Narrative Itself is not One Thing"

- LH: I'm fascinated with the way you bring together nature and culture in a non-dualistic way in *Baby*. Another kind of dualism that's become fashionable in our critical language is narrative versus non-narrative, and the critique of narrative in general. Your own interest in narrative comes up again and again in your work.

I think you are doing something very interesting with narrative. In the tradition of meta-fiction, you are writing about representation itself. As you suggested earlier in your use of the "game," you write "narrative fiction" that is not about plot and characterization at all, but about the making of something game-like in its narrative sequences. I'm thinking of your short prose piece, "Toy Boats." There you raise the issue of narrative and the reality it attempts to create through representational objects. Quoting from "Toy Boats," you write: "I prefer to distribute narrative rather than deny it." Then the piece goes on to suggest that narrative is not a mode of writing that experimental writers should rid themselves of at all, but should use it accordingly.

I would say that this approach to narrative is very different from the "non-narrative," or "anti-narrative," stance taken on by many experimental poets, or, as so well articulated by the cinematic avant-garde, in the tradition of art-house films. But in *Toy Boats*, you seem to overcome this dualism about narrative. You suggest that we should use narrative as its own critic, as its own witness. As you write: "Narrative holds within its boundaries both its advantages and defects. It can demonstrate its own development as it mutates throughout history . . . in accomplishing its mutability, it achieves an ongoing existence."

That all said, can you describe to me further what you meant by "mutability" in this statement? How *do* you imagine a subject's relation to narrative?

- CH: I don't imagine a subject's ideal relation to narrative. I also don't feel at all prescriptive about narrative, and I don't judge narrative or non-narrative negatively. I am very much engaged with non-narrative as well as with narrative: and that's why I say, "I prefer to distribute narrative rather than deny it."

Narrative as a hegemonic construct is overpowering. The concept that narrative is the basis for all communication is quite faulty, and the interventions of non-narrative in all artistic mediums are of paramount importance to me. And the construction of social power and narrative themselves are, of course, related. I wrote "Toy Boats" for the "Non/narrative" issue of *Poetics Journal*. Because I have always read in all of the genres without a sense of hierarchy, or exclusive identification with poetry, I have a response that is different from that of poets who have rejected narrative on ideological grounds. "Toy Boats" is engaged with critique related to the construct of narrative/non-narrative as binary. What continues to be an important engagement for me is the topic of narrative in the context of debates that polemically reject narrative. And, conversely, I am concerned with questions of non-narrative within the pervasive contexts that reject or recoil from non-narrative.

Yet, narrative itself is not one thing, exactly. I like to think about how narrative structures work. I don't collapse narrative into a single phenomenon at all. The critique of narrative in film may be related to but is not identical with this discussion.

- LH: Laura Mulvey, in her seminal film essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," from the mid-'70s, made an argument for the importance of avant-garde rejections of narrative when she wrote that, in the classic narrative-film,

"narrative demands a sadism." She was studying Hollywood filmmakers like Hitchcock when she suggested that, in the traditional narrative film plot, someone has to get hurt, that there is a subject directing linear control over its object (often feminized in her account). Do you agree with any of these assumptions about classical narrative in film or literature?

- CH: I met Mulvey briefly at a conference at Wayne State in 1990. When her essay came out, I was--as were many people--already involved with feminist-related questions concerning art making and the positioning of the feminine within various art contexts. The undoing of narrative, for me, is politically charged and it is a political project. But this process works in various registers, not necessarily consistent with one another, and not necessarily entirely under my control.

On this topic of narrative and sadism, which you also mention in your book, *The Perverse Gaze of Sympathy*, there is this possibility that the forced change narrative linearity demands *is* sadistic. I am not sure that the word "sadistic," however, would satisfy all transformative events within the linearity of narrative. "The forced change" can be seen from multiple perspectives.

For example, in my piece "Fairy Tale," which is a fantasy about Bush No. 1's Iraq War and one of my more straightforward narrative works, the story is about the ideology of apocalypse. A child considers--is she "forced" to consider?--the meaning of "the end of the world." What causes her to consider the meaning of the phrase is, on the one hand, the destruction she's experiencing, and, on the other, the lying and duplicity she experiences from the outside. She is subordinated by the splitting narratives, "right and wrong," "good and bad," of American warmonger discourse. Since morality is not moral, but simply an aspect of war implementation, she has to come to terms with the hideousness of apocalyptic ideology, its ability to control people through fear and to permit violence. The utterance "the end of the world" produces "the end of the world" within her mentality, and the story shows us something about how this phrase helps produce the denial of the violence of the present, which, for some people, is "the end of the world."

I would say, if we were to use the word "sadism" in regards to this story, that the sadism is what the story represents *as the real world*. It is the violence of capital that has visited itself on the girl. But the girl is represented not simply as a victim. She is represented as a thinking and perceiving person who has been given a set of problems to solve. The solutions or mandates of the problems, however, do not lead anywhere except to the fact of existence. This fact of existence is inscribed within the fairy tale that doesn't end (all the terms of the tale have to be understood to end), and is directed toward that in the world which denies the fact of existence of real people whose existence is denied and wrongly interpolated for propaganda purposes to justify government-mandated violence.

V. "I Was Examining the Language as Material, for its Plastic Values"

- LH: I have been struck by these issues of narrative in your work as best articulated, for me, by film rather than literary theory. I feel there is something about your work--perhaps the performance quality, and also the awareness of the visual--that is potentially cinematic. What do you feel is your own work's relation to cinema, or the theories behind perhaps some of the art-house or experimental cinema?
- CH: Let me digress and offer again a bit of literary biography. Throughout the '70s, I was working very actively with the sentence and the paragraph. But I also worked a bit with the line, and that work with the line actually was, in several instances, quite influenced by my viewing of experimental film. The poem "Obstacle," published in my first book *Percentage*, for example, was dedicated to the filmmaker Warren Sonbert, because it was written in the dark of a movie

house in the Mission District of San Francisco while I was watching his film, *Divided Loyalties*.

My poem was concerned with this work I was doing on sentences and paragraphs. I was examining the language as material, for its plastic values, and I was interrogating meaning making within literary, performance, conceptual, and visual-arts contexts. "Heavy Curtains," also included in *Percentage*, is a collaboration I wrote with Barrett as we watched a television show. Around the time that I began working with narrative and non-narrative trajectories--and in addition to my engagement with visual art of the '60s and '70s--I became acquainted with the works of Brakhage and also numerous early twentieth-century films.

LH: You seem to value theory, both about language and about the visual arts. You even write theory yourself. What do you value most about theory, and how might you be using theory in your "fictive" work?

- CH: I guess I am interested in the problem of the artist conversing with the theorist, as well as the problem of art being positioned in relationship to theoretical constructs. This does not mean that I am "anti-theory." But there is generally, in my work, a tension between the artist and the theorist.

Butler's *Gender Trouble* is of great value to me theoretically; her theorizing of gender with respect to performativity is very important. But what she sees and represents as performative is very restrictive in regards to what is made in art.

- LH: How might performativity be particularly central to many contemporary women writers like yourself?
- CH: I find performativity as an important generative for women writers--excuse this peculiar map--from Gertrude Stein to Toni Morrison to Gloria Anzaldúa, to emerging writers like Laura Elrick and Redell Olsen. The performative isn't some kind of exclusive domain of a particular gender. But within the context of gender, and with an emphasis on the woman writer, through the performative, one can find generative interpretation as well as an analytic system.

I suppose that I am very anti-prescriptive with respect to approaches to the aesthetic. And I am so engaged with the problems of difference that I truly resist theoretical projects that try to mandate the aesthetic.

VI. "Writing Can Be a Conversation with Oneself, with Another, with Many"

- LH: Do you imagine for yourself a specific or ideal audience? Do you gender that audience? What kind of reader--from what strategic social positioning--do you see when you write? Do you imagine multiple readers, or someone specific?
- CH: I don't imagine an ideal audience. I may have an audience--but take away the word "ideal." Writing can be a conversation with oneself, with another, with many. And those in the conversation can come and go. Another can invite oneself into their place, language, mentality. Writing can be drawn to or attracted by another. In addition to this contingency of the audience--whom the work appears for--art is an aspect of appearance itself.

On one hand, the audience for the artwork is a function of the art work--even an aspect of it. On the other hand, the art work is constituted by the audience. The audience can thus be "Nobody." Let us consider "Nobody" to be an idea which can gravitate toward non-existence or toward colloquialism: i.e., I'm just a nobody. The writing is constructed through the identification with the "non-" in a certain way. Activity of composition may require the negation of identity. I do not write for you because I can anticipate that or how you will respond to something, but because you might respond but in a manner that I cannot fully anticipate. Writing is the appearance of thinking, but of course thinking doesn't exist in a free form. Nor does the audience. This is what I know, what writing

knows, what the audience knows of writing.

I could be a writer who knows what I write for, for what purpose. That purpose might be to instruct and to entertain. That purpose might be to encourage a question. That purpose might be to interject a proposition into the intellectual sphere that places key assumptions about the nature of literature or society. Does the audience identify with the imagined purpose, and then the writer writes for the audience's identification with such an imagined purpose?

One might say that *Baby* is motivated by a proposition such as: there is a baby in each of us. But this baby in each of us may also be a maguffin. If the word "baby," in each of us, is really an appearance of a non-existent something (word and not word), a nothing, or a nobody, then there is an idea of a baby in each of us that is not a baby. There is an x in each of us that might arouse an aspiration to be or to know or to respond to "baby." There is also the proposition that to "know" baby is not to know baby as a narrative about babies. We are looking to understand that baby who interacts with environments, who is constituted by and intervenes in the environments--because we want to understand the volatility of human nature, its libidinous aspects and its social meanings, and its ability to address problems positively as well as to reflect problems negatively.

So consider this and then the question of the audience. The audience is a baby, or one who would like to engage with the "baby" proposition, or who is interested in the way in which the word baby elicits responses that position baby differently. Yet one also assumes a positive identification with the grammar and logics of baby: I pee, you pee, baby pees. I think, you think, baby thinks. If baby thinks what I think, then a baby might think . . . what you think. What do you think?

I do imagine that somebody will not want to read *Baby*; in its own baroque fashion, it might produce some kind of anxiety about maturity or masculinity or gender identity, for "baby" proposes, perhaps, another gender, even as baby goes by "she."

VII. "The Ensemble Inhabits Something Already Given"

- LH: Let's turn to your work in poet's theater. Much of your most important work over the years has been accomplished in direct engagement with actual present audiences, through the performance-poet's experience with the stage. A few years ago, you debuted your piece *Performing Objects Stationed in the Sub World*, first in Detroit and then in San Francisco. I was very fortunate to have been able to attend the San Francisco premiere. I found it very exciting, original, engaging--and also professionally produced and performed. Would you talk about when you first developed this particular theatrical work, and how it might connect to the last decade of your life spent living in Detroit?
- CH: The work was originally written for a poetry colloquium organized by Romana Huk at Oxford-Brookes University in the spring of 2001. In a two-three day period, I directed a staged reading with Cris Cheek, Miles Champion, Cole Heinowicz, Redell Olsen, and myself, all performing the roles of the performing objects. The reading was really what Jim Cave, the director I worked with on the later San Francisco performance, calls a "demonstration." We were demonstrating performance approaches to and performative functions of the text.

The work was performed in an abbreviated form as a demonstration, again, in San Francisco in the winter of 2002, under the direction of Jim Cave at the first annual Poet's Theater jubilee co-sponsored by New Langton Arts and Small Press Traffic. At this point, a number of the principal collaborators for the 2003 San Francisco performance were assembled.

In the meantime, Zeitgeist Theater in Detroit produced the play, directed by John Jakary. Zeitgeist is a small avant-garde theater space that produces some plays by local playwrights while it focuses on the European avant-garde: Jarry, Becket, Ionesco. In many respects the Zeitgeist Theater was an exceptional

venue for the play, especially as the text was inspired by living in Detroit.

Many people have fantasies about Detroit: the weeds growing in the abandoned parking lots signify a return to nature. Or it is the most violent and horrible city in the United States. Or it is the most segregated city in the country.

Detroit is a majority black-populated city. This does not make it the most segregated city in the country. This is a concept difficult for Media America to grasp. It does mean that, in fairly specific ways, Detroit is undercapitalized: the people of the city have significantly less economic power than they require to develop the political base that would be most advantageous to them.

What interested me about Detroit, as it developed in *Performing Objects*, was the life of what I call the sub world. The sub world does not correspond to any rigid or fixed notions of this part of the world. At the same time, the sub world is predicated on fantasies about and ideological projections of Detroit, while working within the elided social spaces between city and suburb that Detroit techno has so brilliantly conceptualized. In order to live in Detroit, one must live in a sub world; but one also must live in the above/the dominant world. The sub world in Detroit refuses fixed definitions and social rigidity: and everybody knows this world. It's where you have fun, it's where things get made, it's where rigid narratives about race relations and social uplift have no hold, it's where things get sexy, it's where life happens: it is not, however, the same thing as a subculture, because the mainstream culture and activity of the sub world variously interpenetrate.

The text references various genres--from the lyric poem, to lyrics, to fairy tales and documentary, and other inter-genre stuff. It is a fragmentary work that, in performances, is meant to be seamed together through the discovered rhythm of the performance: the ensemble inhabits something already given (the text and the referential spaces determined by the text) and it constructs its own relationship to what's already given; it makes its own space.

In Detroit, the play was directed in a more traditional fashion than it was in San Francisco. John Jakary made a plan and rehearsed the performers based on his plan. But the performers were also performing something that they recognized as being about where they were, and the performance reflected this sense of familiarity.

- LH: Speak more about this space you call a "sub world."
- CH: In a way, the sub world is a kind of refuge. People in Detroit have their refuge--in some sense, you can't live without it. It is also a critique of the way in which "refuge" might reproduce hegemonic structures and narratives. Detroit is antagonistic, for often very good reasons, toward outsiders' views of it. It is also xenophobic: it doesn't like geographic outsiders, and expects to be misunderstood and betrayed by them. The play in its construction of the sub world undercuts the xenophobic aspects of Detroit culture.

In addition to this interest in the sub world as I learned it by living and working around and in Detroit, I became interested in the phenomenon of the suburbs and the way in which my current experience of suburbs intersected with my childhood life. There is something quite compatible between my rural/suburban childhood and the family and sub world cultures of contemporary Detroit. This was recognized--quite sensitively, I feel--by the Detroit ensemble. And the play took on a very particular kind of familiar working-class backyard feeling under Jakary's direction.

LH: So how did the Detroit production evolve into the production I saw at the LAB in San Francisco? How did city/geography change the performance values?

- CH: During the Detroit performance, both Jim Cave and Amy Trachtenberg--the visual artist who eventually collaborated on the San Francisco production--came out to see the play. Even though the San Francisco production was radically different from the Detroit production, the Detroit production and the future

collaborators' visit to Detroit had a significant impact on the 2003 production at the LAB, including that I was able to invite a Detroit actress, Walonda Lewis, out to San Francisco for that production of the piece.

The dynamics of cross cultural relations within the Bay Area and Detroit are quite different, and this is something I wanted the Bay Area people to recognize. I wanted to widen the discursive, narrative, ideological space in which intercultural relations were experienced by the performers. Or, another way of saying this is: I didn't want them to feel locked into pre-given assumptions that could limit what they might do with the work.

This inter-city conferencing was so exciting to me that I am now embarking on a quite ambitious, six-day project that involves bringing people from the Bay Area and Detroit together at the Susanne Hilberry Gallery in Ferndale, Michigan, in August to work on another performance piece, *Mirror Play*.^[3]

- LH: I was impressed with the way in which *Performing Objects* not only was a work of poetry as performed in a theater space, but also hybridically invaded, so to speak, by so many other forms of art. The script itself had this feel or mood of a great Shakespeare comedy, without the same kind of scene-making. It also brought together music and visual art: you composed some lovely pieces that were brilliantly sung by Ken Berry, and you worked in collaboration with Trachtenberg, a wonderful visual artist, on the costumes and sets--the latter of which looked like a conceptual-art installation project in the semi-round of the theatrical space. You also collaborated as director with Cave. Can you speak a bit more of the collaborative experience of this project, and its infusion of poetry, theater, music, and visual art?
- CH: Lots of theater uses the elements you identify, but my work is not purely theater in the conventional sense. As in the writing, there is an inter-generic property: here I would say it is marked by the crossover of experimental theater and performance, and conceptual art. Performance here is not genre-directed, so much as it is a signal of promise within conditions of what might be called a certain postmodern distress.

Unlike the work of Joan Jonas of the conceptual installation art movement, or early Meredith Monk in the world of dance, or Laurie Anderson, who works with electronic media and recorded narrative--all of whom have worked with multiple media in performance in non-traditional/theatrical modes--my work takes a complex text, based in multiple genres that is linguistically self-reflexive, as the initial site of the work: so language/writing is the point of departure and what must be actively sustained to realize the performance itself. If the value of the work is first language, then it is important for me that the language of the visual is intensified as such, that the visual is *not* an illustration of language but a language in its own terms. This would, in most cases, be true with music as well--although in this particular piece, the music was cast in a more supporting role than it was in the 1989 production of my performance work, *There Is Nothing Better Than a Theory*, or in my current piece, *Mirror Play*, which will involve layers of sound, music, noise.

VIII. "What Makes the Work Good has Everything to do with Who is Involved in It"

- LH: Can you discuss the value of process versus final product as you write--and also say more on the issue of collaboration so essential to your process as an artist?
- CH: Process for me is extremely important. I have an open relationship to process. I set no value on regulating the duration of the development of a work. Something might take one week or three years to realize. Something that takes three years might turn out to have been most interesting to me at some earlier phase. This is the way an artist or poet thinks, not the way someone in repertory

theater thinks. My works are well made because their realization requires that they be well made and I do not have a fixed value for what that means. What makes the work "good" has everything to do with who is involved in it as well as with the conceptual approaches to the text and the collaboration process.

- LH: Indeed, you have worked steadily over the years with a number of fine poets and artists. How has the process of collaboration itself been most recently important to the multi-media nature of *Performing Objects*?
- CH: I have been collaborating in various modes with Amy [Trachtenberg] since 1991. There are other visual artists I have worked with and am currently working with in performance and in interdisciplinary collaboration. But Amy has been my closest visual arts collaborator over time. Jim [Cave] is also someone I have worked with as a director--and continue to work with--as well as Erling Wold, who wrote the music for the song lyrics, and who was the composer for the 1995-2005 chamber opera project that brought all of us together as a team for the first time.

The "demonstration" of *Performing Objects* presented at the Poet's Theater Jubilee at California College of the Arts in 2002 was a sketch. It brought together a number of people who remained in the piece, and it provided a basis for further discussion about the realization of the work. The style of the sketch was somewhat slapstick, which was interesting as a way to bring out the contrast between those aspects of the work that could conceivably lend themselves to that kind of humor, and the more lyric and melancholic aspects of the work.

In the summer of 2002, when I was an artist-in-residence at the San Francisco LAB preparing the performance, I began looking at the piece from a completely different angle. I invited both trained performers and Bay Area poets to come in and work on the piece, and, in effect, to take it apart. Both Amy and Jim participated in some of the rehearsals: Amy came into the space and took notes; Jim observed my approaches to cacophony and then came back with shaping responses. My job was to explore collective vocalic and spatial approaches to the work, which would open up the work and ways of working for Jim, as director. I also wanted to hear the piece and find out how performers responded to it--and each other--in an open and improvisatory situation. Outside the practice space of the LAB, Jim and Amy and I had on-going discussions about the relationship of language to performance and to *mise-en-scène*. In working collaboratively in this way, the visual ideas of the artist influenced the directing of the play.

In the summer of 2003, I returned to San Francisco. Actually, I commuted back and forth while living part-time in Detroit, and there were occasions as the rehearsals got underway when I wasn't there. This is another aspect of collaboration: I didn't want to have too much control over the piece, and I wanted to give Jim plenty of space to play around with it on his own. I find this detachment on my end works very well, because changing the process and focus from time to time leaves room for new things to happen.

Amy really knew how to work with the total space of the raw gallery as the sub world itself. Now Amy and I are considering putting together a lecture on collaboration. Jim responded brilliantly to the givens of the space so that there weren't any dead spots. This is something we discussed a lot in collaboration on the piece: keeping the space alive.

- LH: In conclusion, how might collaboration continue to be the basis for your writing--and its performative structure? Can you comment on process and collaboration in your latest performance work, *Mirror Play*?
- CH: My latest performance work is written as a "mirror" of *Performing Objects*. The space of what was the sub world is now a foyer, so architectural concept has replaced the social structure concept of the sub world. But each of these concepts "mirrors" the other. In *Mirror Play*, the one room is also a site within "one world." Any "body" in the world can enter or not the space of the one room. The

question is: what's happened to the house?

As I have conceived its relationship to media now, *Mirror Play* stresses language, sound, and music--at least, that's where I'm beginning with it. Initially, I had conceived of *Mirror Play* as a poly-vocal piece for one performer: I liked the idea of one performer working with multiple voices within the conceptual anti-chamber space. However, that one immediately turned into two as I felt that an instrumental voice needed to be an aspect of the speaking voice. I started working with Jon Raskin, developing the piece for spoken voice (mine) and jaw harps. Now the poly-vocality is being extended to many voices and more instruments. I am about to embark on a six day experiment in developing the work at the Susanne Hilberry Gallery near Detroit, and I have gathered people from San Francisco and Detroit to work on the piece then. We'll see what happens and go from there.

*Department of English
City College of New York
laurahinton@earthlink.net*

Talk Back

COPYRIGHT (c) 2005 Laura Hinton. READERS MAY USE PORTIONS OF THIS WORK IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE FAIR USE PROVISIONS OF U.S. COPYRIGHT LAW. IN ADDITION, SUBSCRIBERS AND MEMBERS OF SUBSCRIBED INSTITUTIONS MAY USE THE ENTIRE WORK FOR ANY INTERNAL NONCOMMERCIAL PURPOSE BUT, OTHER THAN ONE COPY SENT BY EMAIL, PRINT OR FAX TO ONE PERSON AT ANOTHER LOCATION FOR THAT INDIVIDUAL'S PERSONAL USE, DISTRIBUTION OF THIS ARTICLE OUTSIDE OF A SUBSCRIBED INSTITUTION WITHOUT EXPRESS WRITTEN PERMISSION FROM EITHER THE AUTHOR OR THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS IS EXPRESSLY FORBIDDEN.

THIS ARTICLE AND OTHER CONTENTS OF THIS ISSUE ARE AVAILABLE FREE OF CHARGE UNTIL RELEASE OF THE NEXT ISSUE. A [TEXT-ONLY ARCHIVE](#) OF THE JOURNAL IS ALSO AVAILABLE FREE OF CHARGE. FOR FULL HYPERTEXT ACCESS TO BACK ISSUES, SEARCH UTILITIES, AND OTHER VALUABLE FEATURES, YOU OR YOUR INSTITUTION MAY SUBSCRIBE TO [PROJECT MUSE](#), THE ON-LINE JOURNALS PROJECT OF [THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS](#).

Notes

1. Silliman was the first writer, to my knowledge, to use the term "inter-genre" to describe this new style of poet's prose that forms a conceptual-poetry critique of bourgeois realism. See his "Introduction" to *In the American Tree*.
2. These constraints are different from but related to the technique of "restraint" about which Harryman has written and about which she comments in the Interview.
3. *Mirror Play* was performed at the Susanne Hilberry Gallery in August 2005--*Ed*.

Works Cited

Armantrout, Rae. "Feminist Poetics and the Meaning of Clarity." *Sagetrieb* 11.3 (1992). Rpt. in *Artifice of Indeterminacy*. Ed. Christopher Beach. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1998: 287-96.

- Harryman, Carla. *Animal Instincts: Prose, Plays, Essays*. Berkeley: This Press, 1989.
- . *Baby*. Brookline: Adventures in Poetry 2005.
- . *Gardener of Stars*. Berkeley: Atelos, 2001.
- . "Parallel Play." *The Grand Permission: New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood*. Eds. Patricia Dienstfrey and Brenda Hillman. Welseyan UP, 2003.
- . *Percentage*. Berkeley: Tuumba Press, 1979.
- . *Performing Objects Stationed in the Subworld*. Workshop performances at the Zeitgeist Theater, Detroit, MI, and at Oxford Brooks University, Oxford, England (2001); full-length interdisciplinary performance at the LAB, San Francisco (2003).
- . "Rules and Restraints in Women's Experimental Writing." *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Art*. Eds. Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2002: 116-24.
- . *There Never Was a Rose without a Thorn*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1995.
- . *The Words after Carla Sandburg's Rootabaga Stories and Jean-Paul Sartre*. Oakland: O Press, 1999.
- Hirsch, Marianne, and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds. *Conflicts in Feminism*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Ed. Hal Foster. Post Townsend: Bay, 1988: 111-125.
- Lorber, Judith. *Breaking the Bowls: Degendering and Feminist Change*. New York: Norton, 2005.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1984.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6-18.
- Nicolson, Linda J., ed. *Feminism/Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Owens, Craig. "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism." *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Ed. Hal Foster. Post Townsend: Bay, 1988: 57-77.
- Silliman, Ron, ed. *In the American Tree*. Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 1986.
- Simpson, Megan. *Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women's Language-Oriented Writing*. Albany: SUNY 2000.
- Stroffolino, Chris. "Carla Harryman." *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Vol 193. Ed. Joseph Conte. 171-79.