

# How This Project Came To Be...

or...“everyday’s a winding road”...



This project is the culmination of fifteen years of interest and involvement with Poetry Slam at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. I am a poet, designer, media artist and educator. I have never been a Slammer myself, which has given me to a very unique perspective on the scene. Because the role I've played and the work I've done at the Nuyorican has been so varied and pretty confusing (even to me!), I thought I would put “Verbs on Asphalt” in context for anyone who wants to know.



Reading at the Nuyorican in 1998.  
Photo by Michael Meyer.

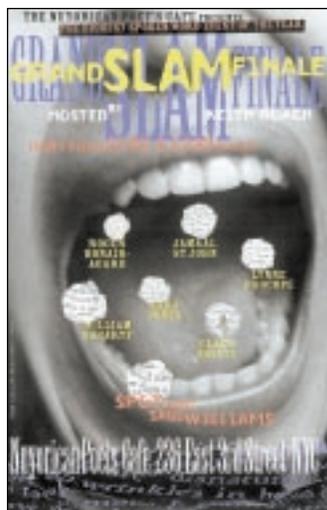
**In August of 1993, I came to the Nuyorican** like everyone else does – to read my poetry! I started in the Open Room, then the Wednesday Night Slam, and Slammed on a couple of Friday nights. Everything was different then, but it was obvious to me early on that I

didn't have the stamina and performance quality needed to compete in Slam. So I continued to write and do “straight” readings while becoming very curious as to what was happening around me; I began to see the Slam as a socio-cultural phenomenon. By 1998, I was beginning to photograph and write about the scene whenever I could.

Back then, Bob Holman was the Friday Night Slam-Master, Keith Roach was the Open Room Host and



Photo is from an article in the NY Daily News about the Cafe, January 5, 1994. That's me reading on stage. Photo by Susan Stava.



The very first poster I created for the 1997 Grand Slam Finale that featured Sarah Jones and Saul Williams.

Evert Eden “broke” my Wednesday Night Slam Open “cherry”. You could hear Indigo screaming the scores or Steve Cannon heckling something annoying but wonderful from the bar. Poetry Slam was still new; Bob and those early poets were in the process of creating what we would later call “Nuyorican” Poetry Slam. It did seem that anything could happen and it often did!

## The Early Nuyorican Poetry Slam Scene

The first Grand Slam Finale I witnessed at the Nuyorican was the night Tish Benson won in 1994 and it seemed like people were standing on the tables at the end screaming and cheering. Well, I know everyone around me was standing UP because I was! These early Slam poets had no precedent; they were “setting the bar” themselves for everyone who would come after them. There was yet no “style” to the Slam and everything was uncharted. These were the first ecstatic moments of Poetry Slam in New York City! It was exhilarating.

At this point, Slam had already been at the Cafe for a few years and lots of interesting writers, performers and poets were coming through from all over the world, even for a minute. Many of them were comfort-



With the 1998 Nuyorican Team taken right before we won the Nationals.

ably Slamming from written pages in front of them – and still getting great scores. This is now unthinkable in Slam. Memorization is definitely the preferred and accepted mode for all participants. But it didn't seem to matter at all back then.

The Slammers coming to the stage during this initial appearance of the form were really

pioneers. I would bet that if we could go back in time, and place today's audience in front of those performers, they might be surprised, maybe shocked. Willie Perdomo, Reg E Gaines, Sarah Jones, Tish Benson, Saul Williams, Hal Sirowitz, Regie Cabico, Edwin Torres...some poets who may not have read anything longer than a typewritten page in a Slam or who were making sound in ways no one EVER heard before – these folks helped create the genre that we know today. And although today's Poetry Slam scene is very different from those early days, it's clear that these early performers were "defining" the scene that we have now come to know. I feel privileged to have been a witness to their groundbreaking artistry.

I've stuck around the Nuyorican for six SlamMasters and ten years worth of National Teams, so longevity alone proved to be my teacher. Once Keith Roach left the Cafe in 1999, I began to take a more active role behind the scenes of the Slam and became a kind of liaison between SlamMasters and Nuyorican administration. My intention was always to try and continue



Anyone who has ever hugged Dot (1997 National Team and Wednesday Night Slam Open Host) knows it feels just the way this looks!

the great work of the early SlamMasters from behind the scenes as the Slam grew and changed.

## How My "Real" Life Collided with Poetry and SLAMMED Me Up Against the Word

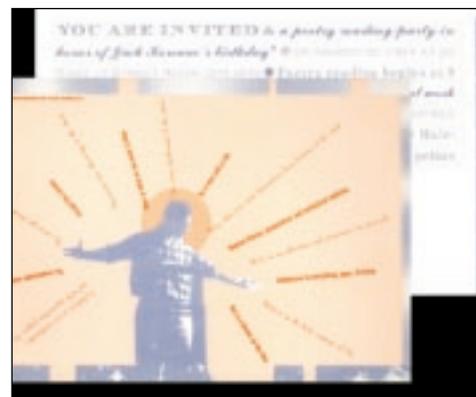


Ultimo Inc. in 1989: Clockwise from top – yours truly, Lili Knutzen, Jo Obarowski and Christine Cortina.

Photo by Cynthia Brown.

When I first came to the Nuyorican, (and actually since 1986) I owned a design studio in Manhattan, and before my profession took a financial nose dive in the late '90s, my studio was healthy, growing and award-winning. I was deeply involved with Communication Design, serving on professional boards, lecturing and teaching,

and well, hanging out with the Design community of New York City! At that time, I could never have imagined that I would care about Poetry Slam at the



The invite I would love to design for our yearly Jack Kerouac Birthday Party Poetry Reading at my studio. This one from 1989.

Nuyorican. Poetry remained something we did in my studio once a year...designers, writers and poets would come over and read their stuff at my place for Jack Kerouac's birthday on March 12th.



The Ultimo girls in 1988 with our favorite celeb client, Spider-man! (I was retained by Marvel Comics from 1986-1991). From left to right: Jo Obarowski, Julie Forbes & Clare.

Photo by Steven Mark Needham

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I didn't expect the design part of my life to interfere or collide with the poetry part. And it didn't seem likely, since there were few similarities between the two worlds. But despite all my efforts at keeping them separate, they managed to come together at the Nuyorican, through the efforts of one SlamMaster named Keith Roach.

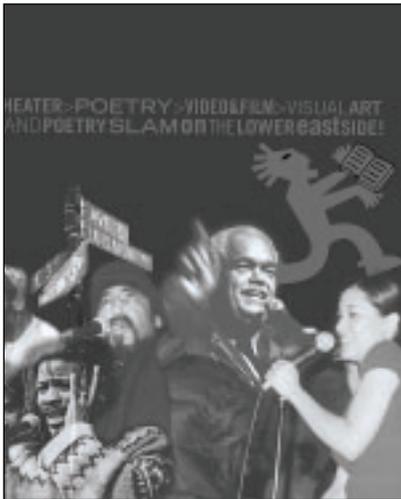
### Creating the Nuyoricano Logo



The logo was created in 1998. Illustrator for the running "Mikey" (named by Lois for Miguel Pinero & Miguel Algarin) was Kobena Gyepi-Garbrah.

The Nuyoricano had no logo or visual identity when I first came. But Keith would change that when he began to involve me in the process. In fact, this was not part of my plan; the Cafe was supposed to be the place where I got to

be a poet...I already had plenty of places where I was a designer! In fact, previous to his request, I had published an article in the Broadcast Design Association Journal outlining the pitfalls and rewards of designing for non-profit organizations.



Close-up of the cover of the Nuyoricano Press Kit. Six tabs inside identify the artistic areas of the Cafe with press and info. Michael Meyer took two of this cover photos.

(See the Words section of my site to read). Even before the Nuyoricano, I had done a lot of design and consulting for these kinds of groups. And if you have any design experience with not-for-profits, you know that it just might be "easier" and more profitable to work for TV, book publishers and banks!

But Lois Griffith really inspired me by suggesting I reference something from Mayan culture (glyphs) as



I created this website in 1999.



Inside spread of the 1999 Grand Slam Finale program. This first layout has held up quite nicely through the years.

a way to express Nuyoricano "roots" and the rest begins the visual history of the Nuyoricano. The website, Press Kit, letterhead, corporate materials, digital photo archive, etc. all began to take form. I wanted the Poetry Slam to have a "look" as well, so I began designing programs and posters for the yearly Grand Slam Finale (both to keep accurate

records and to begin to promote the event as the Gala night it is!) and eventually a yearly T-Shirt design given to each National Team. By 1999, I had begun to take yearly National Team photos and putting posters of these on the Cafe wall. You can see those on the National Teams pages on this site.



National Team T-shirt design.

To brand and visually develop an organization that you really believed in- now that was EVERY designer's dream. A grand example of how the various "loves of our life" intersect, the Nuyoricano identity is one of my favorite design projects over twenty-five years as a professional.

### It's Always Harder When You Don't Have a Stage Name...

My role at the Nuyoricano has never been easily definable but one thing is for sure - I've been looking out and over the Poetry Slam program quite anonomously since 1999. I don't know, maybe part of the mystery of what I have done there was that I never had a stage name. So many of the poets do, and it does seem to make things easier!

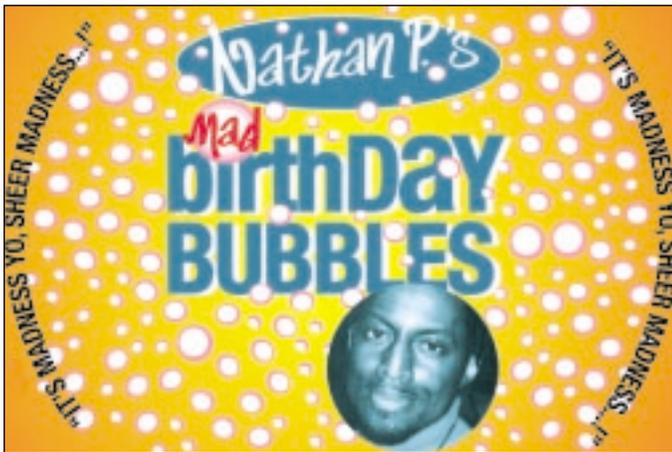
If I've been called out from the audience at the Cafe, I've been described as the "WebMaster", or more awkwardly, "the person" who designs the Team TShirts or "the person who designed" – the logo – or the Grand Slam program.



Getting Nathan P's 40th birthday cake ready to present to him on stage.

And among other things, I have also been "the person with the birthday cake" who remembers a SlamMaster's birthday on a Friday Night.

Mayda Del Valle, when she performed at my



When Nathan P turned 40 (what?) I personalized a hundred jars of bubbles to give out as party favors.

"Poetry Dog Tags" launch party, called me the "SlamMama" as she was describing my involvement with the National Team that year, but there's more to this madness than just making sure the Nuyo team has "Emergency" packets and herbal tea for their throats. It's great to have the opportunity to support other artists on their creative roads.

### Dancing Between the Disciplines...

It meant something very different to call yourself a graphic designer in 1978, when I began my career. I took it very seriously, and read, wrote, studied and discussed the subject constantly. At that time, I was mainly a print designer because design disciplines back then remained quite separate. But as the field has changed and grown, so has my own work. Being the producer, editor, designer and documentarian for *Verbs on Asphalt* might defy simple categories, but this project becomes an example of how skill and passion lead to new forms; work we are still in the process of



"You have a voice – so wear it!" Poetry Dog Tags published in 2001.



Friendship Tags (Poetry Dog Tags for pre-teens) published in 2003.

defining; work that dances between disciplines.

I have been calling my design work "interdisciplinary" since I began my studio, because I noticed that it was informed by other forms and processes of creativity and culture around me. I was lucky for that, since I never stopped seeing myself as a poet and a word-lover – which led me to the Cafe in the first place! *Poetry Dog Tags* published by Chronicle Books in 2001 and *Friendship Tags*, also for

Chronicle, are some of my concept/design inventions that were inspired by the art of Spoken Word, and of course, the Nuyorican. These projects are not easy to categorize; proving perhaps that one definition for who I am and what I do will continue to elude me.

### An MFA in Integrated Media

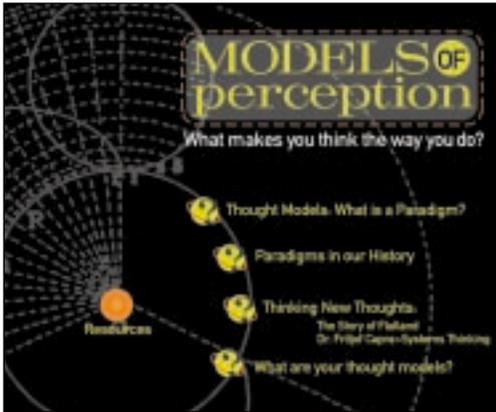
I made *Verbs on Asphalt* because I thought it would be enormously useful as an artistic document of time, place and art form. More importantly, a great opportunity presented itself: I went back to school at night to



"Inner Dialogue" was an experimental video I created during my MFA studies, and has recently become a part of the permanent collection at the Casoria Museum of Contemporary Art in Naples, Italy.

get an MFA in 2001 at Hunter College, and thought this project would make a great thesis. The MFA, in "Integrated Media", is a fairly new academic discipline. The story of the Poetry Slam at the Nuyorican is a perfect one to tell through interdisciplinary forms: the

combination of print, video and web seemed a natural reflection of all the different parts and pieces of this story.



An MFA project in two media: I designed and wrote a website and an illustrated paper, based on physicist Fritjov Capra's amazing book "The Turning Point".

A book of my "word mandala" art is scheduled for publication in Fall of 2009. This work is a combination of two personal passions: love of the letterform and a lifetime of studying esoteric and spiritual wisdom.

All I know is that when you're the first on the page, you've got to draw the map for yourself. I hope *Verbs on Asphalt* will help those poetic angelheaded hipsters of the future as they chart their own way through the vast artistic universe. There is so much we have yet to explore.

– Clare Ultimo, 2008

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"The Palm of Your Hand" Mandala made with text phrases that combine Buddhist and Sufi sources.

See the Graphic Design Work>>> [www.clareultimo.com](http://www.clareultimo.com)  
See my Stranger Explorations>>> [www.angelheadedhipster.net](http://www.angelheadedhipster.net)

**Note about the Nuyorican website:**

Plans, a site map and a clear scope of what this website could become someday have been charted out but I am in need of both funds as well as dedicated, talented people to make it happen– in that order! Email here if you think you can help recreate the site in the future and put "NuyoSite" in your subject line. EMAIL: [voices@verbsonasphalt.com](mailto:voices@verbsonasphalt.com) ....Thanks