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A Louder Voice for Poetry; From Self-Publication in the 50's to Contests Today

By HOLLAND COTTER

America is a nation of poets; New York is a city of poets. But it often seems that only poets themselves are aware of the fact. Audiences for their work are small, financial rewards meager, opportunities to appear in prominent public forums few.

This situation seems to be changing. Competitive poetry readings known as slams have gained an ardent following, and the National Slam, a four-day world championship of poetry, will kick off on Aug. 18 in Austin, Tex.; a 1998 documentary titled "Slam Nation" will open at Film Forum on Friday.; literary bands are flourishing in rock clubs, and poetry has blossomed on the Internet, a medium that eliminates the customary publication hierarchies and gives everyone a say.

But writing poetry as a full-time pursuit, as the thing you do, is still a pioneer's art. There are no shortcuts, no guarantees; resilience and self-reliance are crucial career qualifications.

This has always been true. More than a century ago, Walt Whitman paid a Brooklyn print shop to run off the first edition of his too-hot-to-handle "Leaves of Grass" and distributed and promoted the book himself. Emily Dickinson stitched her handwritten poems into little packets -- each, in effect, a self-published book -- to store away in her New England bedroom for future eyes to find.

Self-publishing enjoyed a real florescence in our own century. Beginning in the 1950's and early 60's, a new poetry outside the academic mainstream was on the rise. It was encouraged by advances in duplicating technology -- mimeographing, offset printing, photocopying -- that made it possible for writers to produce magazines and books cheaply and virtually overnight while having control over contents and circulation.

"A Secret Location on the Lower East Side: Adventures in Writing, 1960-1980," at the New York Public Library at Fifth Avenue at 42d Street through July 25, documents this rich, four-decade-long indie phenomenon in American literature, often called the "mimeograph revolution."

Organized by Rodney Phillips and Steven E. Clay and drawn mostly from the library's collection, the show encompasses some 400 publications, from quick-and-dirty pamphlets to elegantly designed books. (About half the material, in fact, isn't mimeographed.) Some of the best known artists of the era contributed cover art.

A few of the journals are still appearing; most are long gone. And in a sense, it is their ephemerality and their underground origins (the show's title is borrowed from the poet Edward Sanders's account of producing a dissident magazine in his New York apartment) that makes them historically important. As the show's rows upon rows of vitrines reveal, these fragile publications were not so much literary monuments as records of dynamic ideas and personalities passing through a particular time and place.

Although the United States was in tamped-down cold war mode in the 1950's, countercultural energy was stirring. Experimental poetry was an outlet for this ferment, and early on, the avant-garde tended to separate into movements along lines of style, locale and dominant personalities, all of which were defined by Donald Allen's groundbreaking 1960 anthology, "The New American Poetry, 1945-1960."

Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, for example, presided over an influential group of writers at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Robert Duncan was a central figure in a San Francisco renaissance. The poet Frank O'Hara was the lodestar for a so-called New York School. And Allen Ginsberg turned beat poetry into a galvanic force from coast to coast.

Wildly Varied Work Is Brought Together

The work that resulted was wildly varied, but it staked out new esthetic terrain. It brought popular culture, non-Western thought and countercultural politics together in a language that mixed the rhythms of common speech and the improvisatory flair of jazz. And each group generated a multitude of journals and small press books, often created by hand and on the fly.

One of the first entries in the show suggests the flavor of much of what follows. It is a smudgy, much-handled copy of a poem by Ginsberg titled "Siesta in Xbalba." Ginsberg wrote the piece in Mexico in 1954 but published it himself two years later as a 12-page booklet that he mimeographed aboard a cargo ship in the Bering Sea. He gave friends almost the entire edition, 52 hand-stapled copies.

Just a year earlier, the writer had made literary history when he read his explosively anarchic "Howl" in San Francisco. (A first edition of another of his beat anthems, "Kaddish," published by City Lights Books, is one of the show's iconic objects.) And around the same time, extraordinary things were starting to brew in New York.

Like everything about the city, the poetry was wildly pluralistic, though social circles and trends overlapped. The beat presence was evident in magazines like *Yugen*, founded in 1958 by the poet and playwright LeRoi Jones (who changed his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka). A little later came the highly polished *Art and Literature*, edited by John Ashbery and devoted to the work of the New York School poets. And both groups appeared in the mimeographed magazine *Kulchur*, which had both O'Hara and Mr. Baraka on its editorial board.

All these journals figure in the show, but the real focus falls on publications associated with a second generation of New York School poets who settled on the Lower East Side around 1960. At that point mimeographed publications really began to proliferate. Among the most adventurous of them was *C: A Journal of Poetry*, founded by Ted Berrigan, who had come to New York from Tulsa, Okla., along with the poet Ron Padgett and the artist Joe Brainard.

The Word and Art Helping Each Other

Berrigan had learned to use mimeograph machines in the Army during the Korean War, and he turned *C* into an exceptional product. Not only was it packed with some of the best writers around, but also it was almost as engaging to look at as it was to read, thanks both to Brainard, who is one of the visual heroes of the exhibition, and to the range of artists whom Berrigan asked to contribute work.

Indeed, the interplay of literature and art was a hallmark of the period. Poets like Mr. Ashbery, Bill Berkson and Peter Schjeldahl were also art critics. Tibor de Nagy Gallery, among others, routinely published poetry (and has recently begun to do so again). Work by painters like Philip Guston, Alex Katz, Brice Marden, and Andy Warhol crop up on book and magazine covers throughout the show. (Reva Wolf's 1997 book "Andy Warhol, Poetry and Gossip in the 1960's" gives a fascinating glimpse, by the way, into these relationships.)

The exhibition also make good use of other visual material -- snapshots, paintings, videos -- to evoke the tightly networked social communities from which these publications emerged. The Aquarian Age of psychedelic drugs, Vietnam and sexual liberation was itself, of course, a binding force. But so were the collaborative activities that any shoestring literary scene generates: readings and meetings and workshops, all-night printing and collating parties, the passing of fresh images from hand to hand.

By 1966, much of the action centered on the utopian institution known as the Poetry Project, established that year at St. Marks-in-the-Bowery Church in the East Village. Some gorgeous publications -- notably *Angel Hair*, edited by Anne Waldman and Lewis Warsh -- had their origins there. So did the Poetry Project Newsletter, which was started by Ron Padgett in 1972 (a copy of the first issue is on display) and remains an invaluable source of information on poetry, both in New York and beyond.

The show also succeeds in giving a sense of the sheer variety of fringe publications that appeared. Designs range from the minimalist look of journals devoted to Concrete poetry and Language writing edited by Aram Saroyan, Clark Coolidge, Ron Silliman, Charles Bernstein and Bernadette Mayer, to the surrealist flair of the cult magazine *Semina*, created by the West Coast assemblagist Wallace Berman. (The magazine, which was distributed through the mail, was never for sale; its proto-hippie motto was "Art is love is God.")

An Early Bulwark Of Multiculturalism

And for evidence that multiculturalism was firmly in place many decades before the 1990's, one need look no further

than journals that bring issues of race and sexuality to the fore. Some, like Umbra, focused on black American culture. Others, like Poems From the Floating World, edited by Jerome Rothenberg, mixed Chinese, Arabic and American Indian work. And gay voices found a place, from collaborations between Robert Duncan and his lover, the collagist Jess Collins in the 1950's, to the stylish New Wave Little Caesar, edited by Dennis Cooper in Los Angeles in the 70's.

In the late 1970's and 80's, a third generation of New York School poets emerged, and with it publications reflecting new impulses and styles, including neo-punk rock. Some of the magazines, like the short-lived but lively Dodgems, created by the poet Eileen Myles, who has been called "the last of the New York School poets," were nonmimeo in format. And by the late 80's, desktop publishing had rendered such old production modes all but obsolete.

By the time the show draws to a close, just short of the advent of computer technology, it has covered a huge amount of material and inevitably things are left out.

An important and still-vibrant Lower East Side institution like the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, which is based on oral poetry traditions, is given scant mention. The same is true of the wide range of theater and performance art that has always been an integral part of the poetry world. (Such work is increasingly available on homemade videos and audio tapes, yet another alternative publishing medium for poetry.)

Even with some omissions, the ground that has been covered is vast. And it is great to know that the painstaking exercise in historical research that the show represents will have an afterlife in the form of a catalogue to be published jointly by the library and Granary Books in October.

Of course, no book or lineup of display cases can convey the exhilarating charge of live poetry, hot off the press or spoken out loud. And this raises again the question of the future of this seemingly vulnerable, transitory art. Will it find new venues? (Surely the still-forming gallery neighborhood in Chelsea is tailor-made for reforging the link between art and poetry.) Or will it be swamped and made ever smaller by a media-saturated information age?

Eileen Myles, who has lived and written in the East Village for 25 years, is encouraged. "Poetry is always radical," she says. "It's pure democracy. You can't limit it to a one-minute MTV slot. You can't confine it to bytes. It's an art about time and about expansiveness, the open road. Young people now in their 20's now are hungry for that. And we're in there with them."