

POETRY IN THE 80S (a talk I wrote for the Orono conference in June of 2012 and delivered in my absence by Kevin Killian)

When I think about poetry in the eighties especially as it was happening in the world that was the poetry project in its second decade the one when you're no longer a kid or a bright idea but actually an institution I wind up thinking that poetry itself was in a funny place in that same decade when the project was awkwardly growing up. It seems like an organization gets to be radical for the first ten years and then it has to be someplace else. And so was I to be perfectly frank. I won't dwell on me too much well a little. But this was the moment that I was the director of the poetry project. I had actually just stopped drinking and taking drugs in the early eighties which an awful lot of people were doing at that time the joke being that it was like they had tipped the nightclubs on their sides and dumped them into twelve step rooms. Despite the fact that everyone had been planning to party till 1999. The fin de siècle was in the air. In my own case it was like they dumped the east village polish Ukrainian bars with pool tables or the dyke bars in the west village onto their sides and shook me out. And what all this meant for us shorn sober lambs was that you were alone or suddenly collectively be looking at a city flooded with the poor and the homeless. It was like you stood at the ratty graffiti cover piers on the west side where your newly sober friend used to have sex and said wow. It's like you just woke up. I remember when I first came around the poetry project I was informed by some of the older poets that personal poems were *over*. I guess it depended on who was a person and whether they had been one yet. I was willing to suppress it for a while. We also took other avenues. Large groups of us in the late seventies and early eighties (Elinor Nauen

and I started them) did these great juicy chaotic feminist performance pieces where every woman in the community that constructed a new space where our reality was true and from there we laughed at gender and poetry and did our critique lavishly and incestuously. It was our private joke but it was public and you could choose to enjoy it or not. I definitely tried to suppress the personal in my poems for several years and I remember *very* joyously when I wrote a poem that I knew some one else might describe it as personal but I knew for a fact that it wasn't personal at all. There was a tiny gap between the self and what was observed and that distance satisfied me. There was an excess. It was eerie and I experienced it documentary style. Also there was a sound track that was broken, fucked up, edited. It had a tune. And it had work to do. Because this new vision, this panorama of suffering that wasn't new but in your face and your nose and more extensive than ever before, suffering now seemed like a larger kind of self and it seemed like something that was given us to be writing about. I felt moved even honored to be living in such a time. And being not so drunk so I could see it. Even knighted by my era. High on the disorder. Also I always think of a distinction Robert Smithson made between the buried god and the strewn one and I think poetry can be thought about with this in mind.

Alongside the suffering in New York and I haven't even mentioned the many people who began dying too of AIDS we didn't even call it AIDS yet we called it ARC or GRID and there was also meanwhile this new kind of wealth and a baroque puffy quality expounding it everywhere you turned in the eighties: the giant nightclubs, big hair, lots of galleries, limos and cocaine. Sitting right next to the poverty and the stink of shit in the

subway and in the streets. And there was definitely some disdain you'd be greeted with now if you informed anyone you met that you were a poet. Oh do you have a day job. You thought you told someone you were a poet but no you just told them you were poor. Writers of substance wrote fiction, not even prose. So all this was the rippling scrim we were writing in. I mention the Smithsonian view because I think in a more abstract view of things, the buried god does not show his face. But truly god is all over the place in suffering. I always thought Smithsonian's big earth sculptures were monuments of mourning for his dead brother. Poetry in the eighties could function as litanized activism, you could really stare at the streets in your work, perform them, the times with all their nooks and crannies and contradiction, broken mirrors were an invitation to poetic excess. All these lives living next to each other was also kind of like the web before anyone had it. There was a confused togetherness. Jammed up. Also MTV had just been invented so local style, what you saw on the street the teeny crucifixes junkies wore on their ears like the Hispanic women and queers was instantly all over the world, for sale, and the idea of an inside feeling was sort of gone. So poetry didn't represent interiority because it didn't exist and I felt that a lot of work was writing on the wall, a howl of pain, this detailed witnessing. Jimmy Schuyler's long "Morning of the Poem" at the beginning of the 80s gave poets like Tim Dlugos a way to describe their own dying of AIDS. Jimmy's longer life afforded Tim a way to write an exhaustive poem about his shorter one. I think a lot of what I think of as strewn poetry is work that elected to find a home in the world, that picked stuff up or left something thereby finding an audience among people who were enduring loss en masse. Poets in the eighties could find a function for their art. It was also very weird and lucky to have a job as a poet. I mean considering the first year of my

sobriety I cleaned apartments and blew up helium balloons in central park for a Diana ross concert. I mean specifically I was the director of the poetry project for two and half years in the eighties and I both took it as an opportunity to “fix” the institution I had grown up in and have my own first adult collision with power. The poem I read or will read later is about that. The project for quite a lot of people represented a celebration of mostly white male, heterosexual poetics, I mean not if they were Robert Duncan, Allen, Amiri or John Ashbery but the second generation of the New York School was entirely straight I think. I mean Peter Schjeldahl who had kind of left the fold and become an art critic did celebrate Dennis Cooper – I think in the eighties Peter wrote that Dennis was writing what poetry truly was which was prose. And that was fine because we wanted to change everything. Dennis was part of my team, teaching a workshop, when I ran St. Mark’s along with Patricia and there was Alice Notley teaching a workshop and Charles Bernstein who had been in Bernadette’s workshop doing a talk series too. Chris Kraus and Mark Nasdor did a series and it was very poet’s theater and international poetry which was great but Richard Elovich did it the next year and it was all Karen Finley and Jo Andres and Steve Buscemi which made people howl. Not enough poets. Tim Dlugos edited the newsletter and when his friends started dying he ran paintings of them in the newsletter and people actually said what do these fags have to do with the poetry project. It seem like generational and a dispositional overturning of aesthetics and feeling at the moment I tried to rule the project with Patricia – and we ourselves had such a dislike and a distrust of hierarchy INSIDE the project that I remember us needing to have a lawyer to come in and determine if the relationships in the office were like this or that [hands pointing tip to tip] [hands point tip to tip but uneven.] But whatever the inside weather

was outside the project it was *very* clear. The status of poetry was unstable, changing. It was low. I remember a journalist from the Times named Maureen Dowd calling me incessantly one week. Since there was an explosion of art in the east village she wanted me to tell her about the literary one. I was excited. Yes! This was exactly what I wanted to be the director of the project for. To talk to the Times. To tell them about us. And no matter how many poets, and how vividly I described our exploding new mission and vision - and how proudly I informed her about our first season she kept going: you mean writers like David Leavitt and Kathy Acker? I realized that the reason she was calling was for me to eventually parrot back to her yes, yes like David Leavitt and Kathy Acker so she could say that someone at the poetry project confirmed that writers “like David Leavitt and Kathy Acker were central figures to the new writing scene in the east village.” Somebody had a deal with Grove. We want those names from that mouth. Thank you. I remember someone once calling to see if they could get space from the church for an event that was about headlining the fact that people who worked in art organizations were artists too. I listened for a long time and finally told them I thought it was a great idea and I understood that we were artist too. The person paused for a while and said well what kind of medium do you work in. We’re poets I said. Oh the person said. Oh. Well she said we’re just at the beginning of our search but thank you so much for your time. It was like I shared the wrong smell. These calls usually came at the end of the day and the smells of dancers stretching out in the halls and the sounds of the tech people moving across the balcony were what I remember hearing as I grew depressed. It was winter. It was dark outside and I was growing depressed and went home and ate a pint of haggen daaz and went to the gym. Nobody knew that poets were artists anymore.

And in a whole other way that was cool. A public privacy. But then there was the funding scene. I remember Bernadette warning Patricia and I that the NEA was getting a little funny and then we were even invited to a conference at the loft where Liam Rector and Mary MacArthur informed us directly that things were about to get bad. We actually went to DC for a guidelines panel. Us meant Patricia and I, Nancy Peters from Teachers and Writers, Deborah Ott from Just Buffalo. We were representatives of the category Literary Center and the meeting in the office of the NEA was chaired by an angry red faced Frank Conroy the new director under Ronald Reagan and this was an event I've never written about before but to me it illustrated the new politics of public funding first hand. What a shock. We were invited to extol our category which had come into being under the aegis of David Wilk the first director of the NEA who formerly headed a distribution network called Truck. The phrase counter culture that preceded alternative culture was the spirit that had shaped literary public funding and I've often thought what spawned the poetry project and others like it resembled the brief moment of the Russian avant garde being at the fore front of the revolution. This was the eighties now and Conroy's status as fiction writer and memoirist probably meant something in itself, the brooks brothers suit too but mainly you could see that he was irritated and wasting his time and we were there very much to defend ourselves, no just to understand why the category literary center would soon be gone as was most of the poetry project's NEA money. Can I just say for a minute that the Poetry was my graduate program, my education, my revolution. A **self- institution** was very different from one that admitted you after much deliberation of grades and qualifications ethnicity and class. Alice Notley let anyone who could fit in the room come in with their beer on Friday

nights. It wasn't like a life's dream to get accepted into her class. It was just like did you mind the fact that the room was crowded and cold. In the room with Conroy and all of us heads of small literary institutions there were real and actual writers. They were the panel. And they were there to explain to us what writers *do*. I realized in the depths of my being that I was encountering for the first time this notion not unlike the anti poet feeling in the east village now, the sense that a non profit art form (poetry) was clown's work, and another feeling was that these clowns were not to be trusted organizing themselves. Each writer member of the guidelines panel many of whom *were* poets and mostly had teaching jobs (which didn't count as work) were each there to explain to us something else. Philip Levine kind of sneered at the end of our talks. Which were all to the effect of describing the need and the wide reaching impact and audience of our public literary programs. Levine said maybe you don't understand. Poets are lonely weirdos. Writers write he gleamed. He did look like he had been living alone in the woods by himself for a very long time and was glad about that. Tim O'Brien screamed why doesn't anyone read Shakespeare anymore. Stanley Elkin in response to the fact that 20,000 people used our programs each year - I did the math - had I exaggerated. What if it was twenty. What if it was two. He screamed is this a literary institution or a gymnasium. It gave you sort of a racist feel. More bad public smell. The bodies were unavoidable in the 80s. That was the problem. Cynthia McDonald raised a list of all the people who had read at the project since 1966. Who *are* these people she screamed and she really did scream. At the break everyone calmed down. We walked around and schmoozed people we liked which were few. Heather McHugh came over to me and explained kindly and sweetly I really *like* street theater. I was thinking she meant Nuyorican poets but I really didn't know what she

meant. I remember her purple clothes and that she was nice and meant well. She was not them, she was us was what she wanted to say. But the flag of us and them had been utterly raised over the room and what I had learned was the central poetics of American life as I understood it was now one stream next to a roiling corporate affiliate, the mainstream and my own tenure as co-president of the church of non academic poetry actually didn't last that long. But I felt like I was at a precipice of watching a lot of our destinies getting swept into the academy as the next resort or the last one. And we were told to get corporate funding, now that the public was drying up. No one ever explained why it was drying up but it seemed we were poorly run businesses and needed to think about that. The government had helped us and now we must help ourselves. But they were rich! How can I get out of this. This talk I mean. The strewn details of poetry went everywhere. Could be found in performance art and theater. In fiction and in the repeated chants of activist. ACT Up was poetry and Occupy is its ancestor. I was a bad ruler of the poetry project but a brilliant one I think. I with Patricia witnessed the changing of the guard in so many realms. Here is my poem most deeply forged out of that time. If it's been read already by someone (thank you or event if not) just let these strewn thoughts end with a recommendation of an anthology Persistent Voices which includes work by many of the poets who died of AIDS. What I like is the anthology is free of style, is a multitude of them which is to the best index of a time. It lived.

An American Poem¹

I was born in Boston in

¹ You can find this in Not Me (semiotexte(e) 1991)

1949. I never wanted
this fact to be known, in
fact I've spent the better
half of my adult life
trying to sweep my early
years under the carpet
and have a life that
was clearly just mine
and independent of
the historic fate of
my family. Can you
imagine what it was
like to be one of them,
to be built like them,
to talk like them
to have the benefits
of being born into such
a wealthy and powerful
American family. I went
to the best schools,
had all kinds of tutors
and trainers, travelled
widely, met the famous,
the controversial, and
the not-so-admirable
and I knew from
a very early age that
if there were ever any
possibility of escaping
the collective fate of this famous
Boston family I would

take that route and
I have. I hopped
on an Amtrak to New
York in the early
'70s and I guess
you could say
my hidden years
began. I thought
Well I'll be a poet.
What could be more
foolish and obscure.
I became a lesbian.
Every woman in my
family looks like
a dyke but it's really
stepping off the flag
when you become one.
While holding this ignominious
pose I have seen and
I have learned and
I am beginning to think
there is no escaping
history. A woman I
am currently having
an affair with said
you know you look
like a Kennedy. I felt
the blood rising in my
cheeks. People have
always laughed at
my Boston accent

confusing "large" for
"lodge," "party"
for "potty." But
when this unsuspecting
woman invoked for
the first time my
family name
I knew the jig
was up. Yes, I am,
I am a Kennedy.
My attempts to remain
obscure have not served
me well. Starting as
a humble poet I
quickly climbed to the
top of my profession
assuming a position of
leadership and honor.
It is right that a
woman should call
me out now. Yes,
I am a Kennedy.
And I await
your orders.
You are the New Americans.
The homeless are wandering
the streets of our nation's
greatest city. Homeless
men with AIDS are among
them. Is that right?
That there are no homes

for the homeless, that
there is no free medical
help for these men. And women.
That they get the message
--as they are dying--
that this is not their home?
And how are your
teeth today? Can
you afford to fix them?
How high is your rent?
If art is the highest
and most honest form
of communication of
our times and the young
artist is no longer able
to move here and speak
to her time...Yes, I could,
but that was 15 years ago
and remember--as I must
I am a Kennedy.
Shouldn't we all be Kennedys?
This nation's greatest city
is home of the business-
man and home of the
rich artist. People with
beautiful teeth who are not
on the streets. What shall
we do about this dilemma?
Listen, I have been educated.
I have learned about Western
Civilization. Do you know

what the message of Western
Civilization is? I am alone.
Am I alone tonight?
I don't think so. Am I
the only one with bleeding gums
tonight. Am I the only
homosexual in this room
tonight. Am I the only
homosexual in this room
tonight. Am I the only
one whose friends have
died, are dying now.
And my art can't
be supported until it is
gigantic, bigger than
everyone else's, confirming
the audience's feeling that they are
alone. That they alone
are good, deserved
to buy the tickets
to see this Art.
Are working,
are healthy, should
survive, and are
normal. Are you
normal tonight? Everyone
here, are we all normal.
It is not normal for
me to be a Kennedy.
But I am no longer
ashamed, no longer

alone. I am not
alone tonight because
we are all Kennedys.
And I am your President.

