

Light Years: an Anthology on Sociocultural Happenings (Multimedia in the East Village, 1960-1966)

Edited and with an Introduction by Carol Bergé

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"These chronicles are as relevant to the economic collapse, protracted war, stifling social conservatism, and potentials for a new arts scene of the end of the first decade of the new century as they were to the beginning of the 1960s." - multimedia artist and author Karl Young

"In some ways *Light Years* is a heady prose poem of names. Some are familiar to the world at large. If you were there, if you share the nostalgia, if you're an underground poetry fan... Each memoir amplifies the chorus of praise and provocation... Bergé heartily confirms that this was a life worth living, filled with outsized personalities." - lecturer and author Lucy Lippard

Over 650 pages re the nascent beat poetry scene in 1960s Manhattan. Memoir chapters by 36 artists who were "there", including:

Carol Bergé: The Tenth Street Coffeeshop opened and began readings. One night I went in, with poems I'd written in Mexico and Europe. Ed Kaplan was in process of selling his share to Mickey Ruskin, a darkly handsome New Jersey lawyer who was drawn to the arts. His partner was Bill Mackey. Unlike the West Village coffeeshops, this was a tiny space, divided by a trellis-like barrier into two sections; at the far end was a coffee-bar. A barrier meant they could fit a few more tables into the space. It was warm and well-lit. People were reading their poems aloud; the M.C. was another lawyer manqué, Howard Ant, who also wrote poems and was a gambler, a bespectacled gent who lived in the West Village in a cellar apartment and whose poems sounded surrealistic to me. He and poet Ree Dragonette started the readings. I kept going back, not reading, just listening. One night there was a reading unlike anything I ever experienced: Jackson Mac Low was apparently mumbling words that had no sense or order and called them poetry. I and others were very upset; Howard asked Jackson to leave. He did, with his small coterie of friends. I took a strange feeling away from that night's events; it haunted me as I fell asleep in the tiny room upstairs from my Gallery. The classic ground under my feet shook-- something was being presented that felt threatening because it didn't meet my preconceived standards of "poetry." I decided to force myself to be open to what Jackson was doing.

Jackson Mac Low: Some of the earlier readings included music, as did some of mine. (I remember one in which I performed some of my Asymmetries with the clarinetist Nicholas Roussakis, subsequently a professor of music at Columbia University.) I also remember one reading organized by La Monte Young, during which he read, among other things, "acognitive poems" [or was it "noncognitive"?] by the philosopher and [despite his avoidance of the term for himself] artist Henry Flynt, the originator of "concept art"--art in which concepts

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themselves are the artworks--to be distinguished from "conceptual art," in which concepts are embodied or conveyed but are not themselves the artworks.

Kirby Congdon: We who read at the coffee houses were keenly aware of scholastic skepticism, if not antagonism, toward our grass roots movement. I remember Jack Micheline deriding a poet who read his poem from a magazine in which the poem had been printed. He felt it was not only playing it overly safe in one's exposure to public reactions, but that it was pretentious for the poet to assert that he had had work accepted under professional auspices.

It doesn't matter who was correct; what matters is that we all cared about poetry, whatever our private opinions about this incident may have been. Our concern connected us directly to the history of literature because we knew what it consisted of, what its sources were, and how it survived. No one had more than tiny proof that we, too, were the history of literature. But we were there. Timid, uncertain, insecure in ourselves, but certain in the cause, we will always be there. Those who find it convenient, in their self-satisfied definition of success, to dismiss the avant garde as irrelevant or as embarrassing, dismiss themselves, for they have forgotten that the word, spoken or written, is spirit of the culture as a whole.

Judith Malina: Rochelle Owens' *Futz* was in rehearsal on the set of Ken Brown's *The Brig* when the feds came in and shut down the theatre on October 17, 1963. A spectacle ensued, the poets and artists surrounded the theatre - their theatre. The police set up lines with horses. Julian called out from the second-story window that there would be a performance that evening for those who could make it past the police barricades. Ladders were brought from other off-Broadway theatres and thrown up to the windows. The public climbed up over the roof as the police tried to pull them down. We gave our final performance on 14th Street and at the end of the play, the police carried us from *The Brig* set into the paddy wagons and the downtown lock-up.

Rochelle Owens: Enter Fee Dawson, a beer-bellied w.a.s.p. who was one of the most viperish misogynists that ever slung a scrotal sac between hindquarters. At some point that summer evening, Dawson focused his oyster-colored eyes on me and began to scream about how I represented all that was wrong with the mid-West, how 'bourgeois' I looked, critical, unsexy, that I reminded him of his old-maid aunt or sister. Drunk and shittily obnoxious, he howled a demand that I pull out a checkbook and buy a painting of his. At the time I thought it was because I was wearing horn-rimmed glasses, a black and white cotton polka-dot dress with a full nylon crinoline slip that created a graceful umbrella effect, black patent-leather pumps and a wide red patent-leather belt. After all, I worked in an office as a typist-clerk, and it would not have been appropriate for me to dress 'arty' by wearing a leotard, and Indian paisley skirt and viscous brown leather sandals, the bohemian look that was de rigeur at the time. Besides, that look was not me. Judith Malina had also objected to my taste in clothes. She had ridiculed me for dressing like a suburban housewife.

As Dawson ranted, Hettie came to my defense, saying that I came from Brooklyn, and not the mid-West, and that I was a wonderful poet whom Roi was publishing in his magazine Yugen. Dawson grumbled something about wanting more beer and sandwiches, and scuttled off like a fat crab towards the Jones' refrigerator, opened the door, pulled out the food, baby bottles belonging to the two baby daughters of Hettie and Roi, beer bottles, apple juice bottles, cranberry juice bottles, date juice bottles, eggs, frankfurters, grapefruits, honey bottles, ice-cubes from the freezer, feta cheese, jam jars, ketchup, kaiser rolls, lemons, marmalade and matzoh, nutcake, oleomargarine, peanut-brittle, quince-jam, rugala salad, salami, tiny carrots, ugly fruit imported from occupied Palestine ordered specially for Roi, virgin olive oil, waxy yellow beans, X-tra rich unpasteurized cottage cheese, yellow yams, and zucchini bread, laid them out on the floor, ogled an 'earthy-looking broad' built like a

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brick-shit-house named Margaret Randall, and on fat buttocks and calves inched stalwartly through the foodstuffs towards the openmouthed surprised girl.

Fielding Dawson: Hubert Selby Jr. Anybody who knows him calls him Cubby. Gil called him that from the beginning. Gil being Gilbert Sorrentino. You'll notice that Last Exit to Brooklyn is dedicated to Gil... there's a good, unwritten story in all this.

...That very interesting gentleman named Fritz, in their youthful, Brooklyn friendships, where Fritz told some of the escapades in Last Exit to Cubby, and Cubby had the genius to write them down, and went to Gil for help because Gil had been to college and was married to Cubby's ex-girlfriend, Elsene. She knew Fritz, too. But once Cubby and Gil began on the book, Fritz, insofar as history was concerned, was out.

Margaret Randall: The connection between the New York City coffee house poetry scene of the sixties and *El Corno Emplumado* remained vivid, intense. The journal introduced William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Elaine de Kooning, Cid Corman, Ed Dorn, Susan Sherman, Ted Enslin, Denise Levertov, Walter Lowenfels, Robert Creeley, Carol Berge, Jackson Mac Low, Paul Blackburn, Diane Wakoski, Al Young, Robert Kelly, Jerome Rothenberg, Roberts Blossom, Larry Eigner, Gary Snyder, Rini Templeton, Kenneth Patchen, Thomas Merton and some two hundred others to a Latin American (and to some extent a world) audience.

Jerome Rothenberg: I was given a poem in the dream... a poem I read aloud... where I could feel the words coming in bursts but couldn't salvage them... I only knew the poem's name was "Seedings" & that it followed after a performance of "cokboy" in which I had to improvise the final lines, unable to remember what they were... Between poems I made a comment about Duncan's peculiar way of reading, knowing he was dead but seeing him sitting in the audience & nodding at me when I started reading...

Diane Wakoski: I was writing constantly, but unlike many writers, while willing to try many different styles of writing, I never abandoned my old poems for new ones. I still continue to feel that my earliest poems were as good as my newest ones are. Different, not better or worse. On New Year's Eve of that Year, a momentous thing happened to me. I had gone to LeRoi Jones' (now Amiri Baraka) New Year's Eve party and been rather unhappy for personal reasons. George Stanley, a San Francisco poet now living in New York, on whom I had a crush and referred to as The Pony Express Rider in my poems, was flaunting his homosexuality at me, making fun of me as a woman with an interest in him. So, I was forlornly wandering through the crush of people when I ran into Diane di Prima who asked me if I wanted a pill. Now, I am simply one of those anachronisms of my generation. I am not a drug taker or user. I had a weird kind of Puritanism in those days, which made me feel that beauty, and inspiration could only be natural. So, I didn't wear make-up (never have), and I didn't take any drugs, even aspirin. I didn't drink coffee and I hardly drank alcohol in those days. I had no idea what this pill that Diane was offering me was, but I felt so wretched that I said "yes," and instantly swallowed it, wondering if like Alice in Wonderland I'd shrink or fall through a hole or what. In fact, nothing seemed to happen, but in retrospect I believe it was some kind of speed, the kind that makes you friendly, talkative, though not particularly high. Right after this crazy act on my part, I ran into Howard Ant, and he asked me and another woman from Berkeley whom I had run into, if we would like to go to another party. Gratefully, I said yes.

Carolee Schneemann: Impulse scan: to attack media celluloid hallucination flat linear dimension stream electric light beam. Flesh it paint it draw dimensions from projected imagery into image motion. Actual. That

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audience in those dumb predictable rows they're going to FEEL us and we're going to feel them. Phoebe and I in wacky coveralls crawling hand over hand over foot on the audience; sticky fingers, grasping hands, knees butting help! spilling candies bubbles ropes balloons damp laundry out of our infinite coveralls. Contact with every person there. Mumble abstractly to them, to each other..... "oww, my arm is caught.... lift my leg out of your lap.... have a candy... Phoebe where are you?hold these balloons.... get your hand off of there.... Carolee what do we do next? Gerd start the film.... stop the film..... give us light.... too much light" Cathode ray films three screens wrap around us all. Dark. Illuminated. Our bodies stretching into materials.

Ronald Tavel: Then one November evening in '64 while I was reading, Andy Warhol appeared with a small entourage, in search of voices he would need now as he shifted from the making of silent to sound films. Gerard Malanga, at that time the artist's right-hand man, had asked him to fall by at my reading. Andy listened to me with patience and when I was finished sent the proverbial embossed card to my table asking me to join him at his. When I made my way through the crowd to where he was sitting, he smiled, suddenly shook my hand and, without further ado, popped the time-tested, Wanna be in movies?

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This anthology illuminates the Light Years coalescence of largely unknown poets and artists and other investigative types experimenting in the new art, multimedia. Collectively these memoirs sing a definitive anti-establishment song about the most insanely zany decade of last century.

Nowhere else has the human struggle to cope with the evolutionary leap from industrial to high-tech society coupled with war and peace tension and the resultant fallout been blueprinted with such intensity and in such flat-out intimate and shifty, perhaps universal, terms. Did these pioneers get what they deserved? Who all was involved? What actually happened? Find out! within these pages.

- James Beach of AWAREing Press

"With the completion of the *Light Years* manuscript, Carol Bergé passed away in February 2006. Her last years can only be described as heroic as she continued her life's work in the face of an encroaching illness that left her weakened and debilitated. Yet her passion for life and her work sustained her far beyond the prognostications of her doctors..

"What is most remarkable is that although the individual artists and writers made their personal impact, it was the group support for each other that created and sustained the creativity of the period. As with every movement which depends on the historical moment, the group energy dissipated at the end of the sixties." -

Carl Ginsburg, publisher, AWAREing Press

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