

## ***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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**Contact:** James K Beach

[thespookyart@outlook.com](mailto:thespookyart@outlook.com)

*"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 in 1960 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 themselves are the artworks--to be distinguished from "conceptual art," in which concepts are embodied or conveyed but are not themselves the artworks.

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**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...

**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 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.

**Kirby Congdon:** In the new poetry scenes on the East and West coast, there were few power-hungry doers and shakers. There were individuals who got readings going, sometimes got posters made, and who negotiated for time and space at the coffee houses. No person, however, could claim authority or other control in any social or literary way. Those who did have control were involved with scholastic publications, none of which could afford to recognize the more democratic plateaus of the great unwashed. A definition of the professionally-recognized literati could be: those who can only afford to admit you exist when they are sure you no longer need such recognition. I find this is still true some thirty years later. This attitude, of course, comes from a fairly long tradition of competition peculiar to America. Fostered first by the advertising business in the late Victorian era, this approach consisted then, as it does now, of blandly asserting that their academic product superceded any other. This tacit assumption was transferred to academia by our acceptance of rank: good, better, best. The schools require this approach to prove their financial standing for any inquiry from the public. Everything must be graded, charted and classified. The Coffee-House Movement and the Mimeograph Revolution were necessary antidotes to this narrow, egotistical and paternal tradition that was so much in power in setting literary standards in the two decades after World War II. I am not opposed to standards, taste, and sophisticated judgments, but if, in getting these, overall literary activity itself is ignored or denied, it keeps us culturally provincial. Yet well-established literati still hang on to the competitive hierarchies in literature as though the habit were a security blanket. The result is that they cannot give a kind word toward the activity of non-academic poets unless that word enhances their own position of divine authority and personal glory. The fear inherent behind their reservations only helps set that cement of provincialism which we have been trying to chip off since the early nineteenth century. We who read at the coffee houses were keenly aware of scholastic skepticism, if not antagonism, toward our grass roots movement.

**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.

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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.

**Fielding Dawson:** Hubert Selby Jr. Anybody who knows him calls him Cubby. His Last Exit is the classic descent into the hell of forbidden dreams. The American academic elite, in link with homophobic, religious, rightwing fanatics, are the dreamers, longing to live the scenes in these pages, that are deeper than their haunted midnights. This is where it's real. My students at Bowling Green University (1972) - freshmen - were outspoken for the death penalty, but thought Last Exit was immoral, and repulsive. The reporter who wrote that article, and who quotes Cub, didn't know the rich, inner, cynical laughter he got out of the response to his book. Cub was impressed, also, with the big academics who reviewed it, with praise, talking about his great ear. What a joke, in their high, ivy towers, creaming in their robes over the book, come on. Cubby had a complicated deadpan, yet vicious down-in-the-basement style laughter, in those days, for the joke was, from his point of view, on anybody who read it: he wasn't queer! See his wife and kids?

**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.

**Philip Corner:** That was a decade full of demonstrations..... : and every cause was just . Also great the singing that went with---a sure lesson to us all in relevance. The power of music that we sometimes had to search for. So both pleasure and duty combined to make almost any political street scene come-on by-chance., irresistible A few times I was able to add my own voice: the candlelight peace walk with the chimes from Carroll Drum Service sounding with voice unissons; the *New Style March (for a Free People)* keeping a strong beat yet avoiding banal riffs, alone on a snare drum because Max would not help me ( but said I could do it and I did)down Broadway at the head of a procession (for some good cause) and running into an old buddy from the Army Band--. A cop on-duty. A veteran's group (might as well get some benefit for being one) and the pacifists (Jackson of course withthem) made common cause. Aesthetic quality brought to the cause. We even teamed up with the

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BREAD AND PUPPET THEATER - PETER SCHUMANN's CentralEuropean-type "Passion Plays" proving highly adaptable to New-World Big-City uses. Although his fundamentally conservative conception prevented my being of use to him, a piece of mine was integrated into their performances. *Message Prelude* where, after a countdown with a (toy) rifle trained on the audience, is thrown away and roses instead thrown out. (Which in turn was protested by the leader of UpAgainstTheWallMother-fuckers "seize power now" revolutionary group who screamed at me "Next time a real rifle! Mu thuh Fuck kuh!!)

Impotent gestures too.... : deduction of a protest percentage from incometax returns. When (ofcourse) the IRS catches up, in the form of a nice-enough man just doing his job "Now that you've made your statement...." I told him I would not play games with him; so I told him where the bank was; "But **you** have got to go over and take it.

After the big march on Washington, where they/we failed to levitate the Pentagon...or stop the War. although an unbelievable popular success (and was not the Peace Movement grown so big basically because America was losing?) and every pop singer was getting off on "protest"..... I stopped going.

**George Economou:** In the spring of 1960, immediately after the publication of the first issue of *Trobar*, we planned a poetry reading series at the Cafe Cino in Greenwich Village. The magazine had been founded and named there, and its owner, the late Joe Cino, was all for the readings. In fact, it was just at that time that Cino was introducing various kinds of artistic programs in the place, a policy which culminated in the Cafe Cino's becoming one of the great Off-Off Broadway theaters for the next few years. As in the production of the magazine, the reading series had an urgency and a sense of commitment to it that was enhanced even more by the belief that what we were doing in both areas was really all of a piece. In retrospect, it seems to me we were answering a serious calling, which is probably true, but it was an exhilarated rather than a somber seriousness. Among those who participated in that Cino series were David Antin, Clayton Eshleman, Jack Hirschman, Robert Kelly, Jerome Rothenberg, and Armand Schwerner. The ambiance was simultaneously informal and intense, proceeding from the conviction that to read to a live audience was an act that naturally followed the writing of poetry and that such face-to-face communication was mutually demanding and edifying. Speaking for myself, that prevailing sense of *communitas* and its power to incorporate poets and audience into an intimate, interacting group was one of the greatest and most valuable lessons of the experience. It was out of such an ethos that the high point of the Cino readings came. The program of Medieval Poetry and Jazz was a collaborative reading-performance involving a small jazz ensemble, a group of us already associated with the Cino readings, and Paul Blackburn, some of whose translations with the Old Provençal of the troubadours provided the heart of the poetry selections.

**Ronald Tavel:** 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?

Later he explained it was a certain voice-over-sound he was looking for, someone to read, preferably the telephone directory, while his "screenography" of Jean Harlow, to be christened HARLOT, unreeled. He told me that whatever I chose to read or perhaps improvise should not be even indirectly related to what was to be seen, but that my hushed underbreath would function instead as the appropriate accompaniment to the whatever on-screen. It was as an actor of sorts then that I entered underground cinema and not a writer: that was still several months off. And so my serious involvement with the Manhattan poetry scene came to an end and my days of acting, directing and scripting began.

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**Diane Wakoski:** We were an odd bunch that started the Tenth Street Coffee House scene. We were academic, in that we had all been to college, and had been thoroughly educated in Modernism. So, while we did represent new things in poetry, not the academic poetry that was being written by college professors, at the same time we were snobs and not really interested in street poetry either. Howard Ant was a lawyer, but he hated practicing law and loved playing chess and poker. He was a bachelor and lived on a shoestring, so that he could spend all of his time at chess or poker, both of which earned him some money through betting. He often used as his persona in his poems a riverboat gambler. Mary Mayo, who became his girlfriend, was the daughter of a Midwestern college professor and poet, though she only aspired to some white collar job, or perhaps she too had the bohemian bug --

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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

(carolberge.com)