

## SEARCHING ARTISTIC ORIGINS

## ANTONELLO'S LION

Steve Katz

Green Integer

<http://www.greeninteger.com>

592 pages; paper; \$14.95

After fourteen books in a multifarious literary career that spans nearly half a century, one would not expect Steve Katz to pin himself down to any one perspective. As W. C. Bamberger writes in *43 Views of Steve Katz* (Borgo Press, 2007), “[f]rom *The Exaggerations* [of Peter Prince] through *Moving Parts* to *Weir & Pouce*, *Swanny's Ways* and *Antonello's Lion*, Katz has steadily been moving from the knows-too-much of post-modern consciousness toward a state of perpetual wonder at what he sees and feels and can imagine.” The cartographer Ellis Prefontaine, a minor character in *Antonello's Lion*, echoes this sense of free-ranging wonder in the text: “I have made maps all my life, and now it is my pleasure to be lost.” In his first novel since 1995's *Swanny's Ways*, it is Katz's pleasure to follow the lost into various degrees of foundness.

*Antonello's Lion* is a double picaresque centered on New York expatriate Solomon Briggs and his financial adviser son Nathan, who have never met. After impregnating his artist girlfriend in 1964, Solomon disappears in the boot of southern Italy while in search of a painting of Saint Francis by the Sicilian master Antonello de Messina (c. 1430–1479)—a work which, he believes, with an almost frightening tenacity, has been lost and awaits his re-discovery. His travels in search of this painting are intercut with Nathan's search for his father in 2001, a journey that becomes Solomon's paternal gift to his son.

The novel combines two of Katz's long-time loves—art and Italy—both of which he renders with a lush connoisseur's eye. He came of age in New York in the 1950s, just as that city rose to prominence on the international art scene, and Solomon's fervor for Antonello captures the appetites of that era. Katz also spent several years in the city of Lecce, around which the novel primarily unfolds, and gives full body to that region's landscape and people. We sometimes visit the same places in 1964 and 2001, and although the surface is different—roving bands of art students replace memories of American soldiers from WWII—the lure of the place for father and son remains.

Though it would be unfair to categorize *Antonello's Lion* as mere *pas de deux*, much of the narrative derives from the juxtaposition and overlapping of the two men's quests. Both are tunnel-visioned in pursuit of the self; they share a makeup that is part genetic, part a similar brand of *Weltschmerz*, part a shared need for a worldly home. Their fates and quests are intermingled to the degree that they become, at times, indistinguishable; Katz indeed starts many chapters without immediately letting us know which man we are following. Some of Katz's most

colorful and decisive writing comes when he forces his characters to wait—Solomon for the woman who will show him a stored Antonello painting, Nathan for this mother, etc. These moments of repose let them see the world in ways that their compulsivity and perpetual busyness never allows.

But the two men's shared personality only sets up the more fertile differences between them. Minor characters Solomon meets—such as Annelino, the revolutionary on a ferry to Palermo, and Siegfried, the German egglayer—open themselves up to him and reveal their inner lives in startlingly moving fashion. He seeks, in Antonello's work, “the way to a secular spirituality” that he has a difficult time explaining to the old-world Catholics of southern Italy; he remains, to the end of his story, a man passionately connected to the world and to the people around him.

***Katz leads into such moments of unreality so subtly that the shift is barely perceptible.***

But Nathan generates no such trust, and remains a cipher even to himself. A financial adviser who has made at least one friend fantastically wealthy, he disdains money. He seems willfully blind about his own life, wandering in circles while he waits his turn in the novel's parallel structure, and his adventures pale in comparison to his father's; while Briggs *père* promises to marry a perfect maiden before bedding a succulent whore,  *fils* trysts with an American art student, and visits a Club Med. This may be Katz's commentary on the watering down of the human spirit between the two generations, or simply Nathan's own realization of how rudderless his life is. His is a contemporary malaise, an anomie that Katz nails on the head, and as he wanders the fringes of his own life, we find Solomon increasingly dear for losing himself in the depths of his own.

But while Solomon seeks a secular spirituality at all costs, it is Nathan who gets to experience it; the father's proclivities appear to have been handed down to the son with an entirely different set of tools—some sharper, some duller—to cleave away at the same spiritual question. Many of Katz's most beautiful passages in *Antonello's Lion* describe moments of magic that Nathan is privileged to see, such as the centuries of art that roll by the portholes of a submarine riding through Venice.

As if in slow motion, the mighty horses of St. Marks galloped by the portholes, parting clouds of murk, spinning art and corpses in their wake... The exhale from the flared nostrils of the great steeds rose like tremendous tears through the brownness, like dream eggs that floated upwards and away.

Katz leads into such moments of unreality so subtly that the shift is barely perceptible. In these passages, the Katz we know as an innovator and experimenter breaks out and lifts the story to a place where it lingers in the reader's imagination: Solomon's first visit to the catacombs, the Céline-esque

## Steven Wingate



Detail from cover

depiction of a fish market in Palermo, or the flying goats known as *Caprestrelli*—whose initial breeding we witnessed through Solomon's eyes—that defecate and/or shower milk upon Nathan and his girlfriend. The Katzian penchant for dissatisfaction with the merely well-made tale, which appears throughout his work as linguistic and formal devices (e.g., *Creamy and Delicious* [1970]) or in self-conscious authorial playfulness (e.g., *Saw* [1998]), expresses itself in *Antonello's Lion* through these brilliant, subtly-led-into streams of imagery that paint a fertile background around his complexly intertwined characters.

In *Antonello's Lion*, the “perpetual wonder at what he sees and feels and can imagine” mentioned by Bamberger is enriched by the dual minds through which Katz-as-author lets us see the world. But both Solomon's and Nathan's minds, thanks to their picaresques, offer far more than two perspectives; through their travels, Katz paints us a precise and layered portrait of the world. In this respect, the mapmaker Ellis Prefontaine provides another glimpse into the core of the novel. Enshrined in the massive motel-like Colorado mountain compound that Nathan's financial advice has allowed a friend to afford is:

the great Prefontaine cyberglobe, endless modes available with the touch of a remote stylus, so it could feature cities and roads, both day and nightscape;...a projection of the distribution of world religions;...the migrations of tribes, so you could watch the armies of Saracens, Visigoths, Mongols sweep through.

In this sense, there is no better description of the experience of reading *Antonello's Lion* than the metaphor Katz himself offers here. Thick with the fervent confusion of human identity and the conundrumy brew of our created world, the novel offers many rewards—especially for readers willing to wade on the shore a moment, letting the waves tickle their feet, before its undertow pulls them in.

Steven Wingate's short story collection *Wifeshopping* won the 2007 *Bakeless Prize* for fiction from the *Bread Loaf Writers' Conference* and is forthcoming from Houghton Mifflin in 2008. He teaches at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

# THE CONTENT OF THE FORM

Doug Nufer

## TABLE OF FORMS

Dominique Fitzpatrick-O'Dinn

Spineless Books

<http://www.spinelessbooks.com>

124 pages; \$25.00, cloth; \$12.00, paper

Even though few books provide such thorough explanations of their principles of composition as this book does, *Table of Forms* revels in deception. It is, to begin with, a Spineless Book with a spine that has nothing on it. The author, Dominique Fitzpatrick-O'Dinn, is a patently fraudulent pseudonym for William Gillespie. The "fourth edition," with a 2006 copyright date, is the first fully revised edition, and was released in the spring of 2007. Anyone who has noticed Spineless Books, with its 2,002-word palindrome story *2002* (2002) by Nick Montfort and William Gillespie and its Fitzpatrick-O'Dinn Prize for rule-driven literature, might be prepared for this audaciously ambitious and beautifully realized collection of poems written by formal constraints, and yet even the most devoted followers and practitioners of such work may cringe at the prospect of having to deal with procedural poetry.

Formal work poses two problems: will the forms overpower the poems, making these pieces more interesting as puzzles than as works of art; and, will the act of reading be reduced to a guessing game, in which the reader must solve the puzzle behind the poem or feel stupid at being left out of some joke perpetrated by the poet? Gillespie solves the latter problem by providing a glossary, with definitions and etymology of the methods he uses, and identification of which poems follow which methods. Even when the forms are traditional and obvious (sonnet, sestina, palindrome), this is an essential key, particularly when so many poets take liberties with certain forms, such as the sonnet, as to defy definition. Relieved of having to play the guessing game, I found myself going back and forth from glossary to text, but eventually the elegance and panache of the poetry kept me from checking the glossary until later.

Although formal constraints have been around for centuries, Gillespie works in a contemporary tradition whose foremost practitioners are members of the Oulipo, the Paris-based group of writers and mathematicians founded in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais. Gillespie's poetry can seem as feverishly wrought as some works of Ian Monk and at other times as stylishly refined as some works of Harry Mathews, but *Table of Forms* more resembles Queneau's 1947 classic, *Exercises in Style*, where he retells the same vignette in different ways, branding each version with the rhetorical device he uses, as well as the recently re-released *Oulipo Compendium* (2005) edited by Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie, with its definitions and demonstrations of a wealth of formal devices. Occasionally, Gillespie's terms and definitions vary from what other rhetorical guides offer, but these variations, along with their examples, amplify rather than confuse the issue at hand.

As Georges Perec, particularly in his novel *Life: A User's Manual* (1978), seems disinclined to limit himself to using "only" one constraint at a time, Gillespie often uses more than one form at once,

sometimes combining them, such as in the following heimlich (haiku plus limerick).

### Maneuver

Newspoem 16 March 2000

there is a forest  
on fire, flames spreading higher  
and higher. do I

stand around, while it  
burns to the ground, this deadly  
maniacal pyre?

For that matter, the entire newspoem series not only introduces another layer of constraint to many of the poems here, but also addresses a complaint poets often hear when forms are as evident as content: by forcing readers to adjust to an unusual mode of expression, the writer is being effete or hermetically self-indulgent.

Using reports of current events, Gillespie began writing newspoetry in 1995, and from 1999 to 2002, he and Joe Futrelle edited a newspoetry site at <http://www.newspoetry.com> that offered a poem a day. These poems show that a level of personal engagement with the world at large is more moving and effective than the emotional slop political feelings too often inspire. After all, using their own table of forms, "embedded" journalists that call mercenaries "contractors" render events in an authoritative cant that is more intent on protecting the status quo than with revealing what really happened. A writer using formal devices can emphasize the insidious linguistic patterns people have come to accept, whether it comes from the newspaper of record or some broadcast of fair and balanced propaganda.

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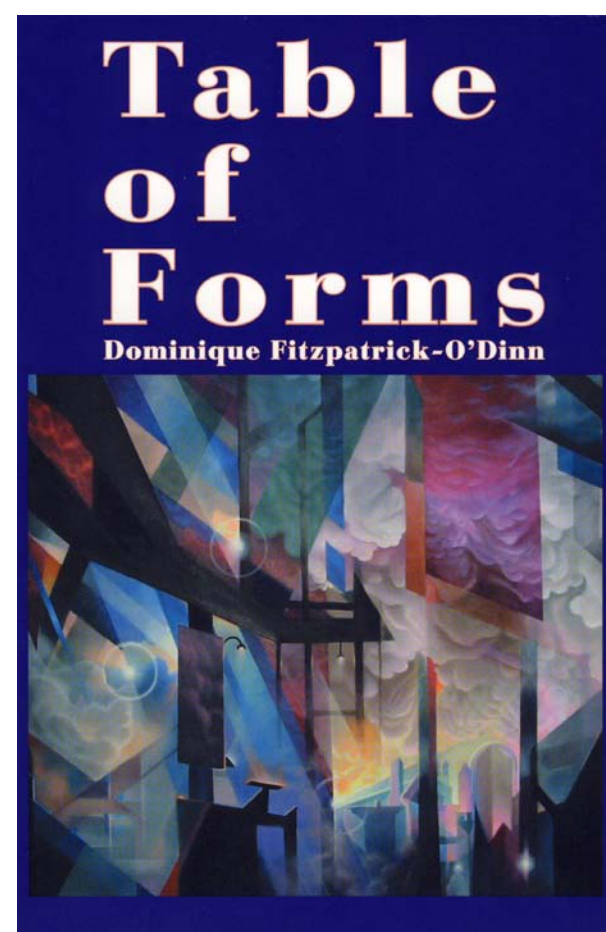
***The advantage of working with a variety of demanding rules is not that you get to say whatever you feel like saying, but that you get to say whatever the rules allow.***

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Using the pantoum, Gillespie retells the story of people sent to prison for protesting the School for the Americas in "Dan and Doris Sage." As the second and fourth lines of each stanza become the first and third lines of the stanza that follows, the pattern highlights the pathetic absurdity of the protesters' plight, as they are trapped in the government's scheme of justice. In another pantoum newspoem, Gillespie and Andy Gricevich commemorate a presidential encounter with a former adversary, but in "Clinton Does Vietnam," the form takes on a breezier, hilarious tone as it plays with the mode of speech of a consummate politician.

Many of these poems express a certain personal stake, either in political or social matters, and many do not express a stake in anything Gillespie or his pseudonym might care to reveal. The advantage of working with a variety of demanding rules is not that you get to say whatever you feel like saying, but that you get to say whatever the rules allow. The freedom such restriction allows can lead the writer to write works she or he never would otherwise think of writing.

One disadvantage of working with a variety of demanding rules is that the objective of meeting the demands of the rules can overpower all other concerns. I don't mind if the forms take over the poem,



but some of the poems here (e.g., "Joey Zoey" and "Poetry Class") strike me as more interesting in the ways they follow their rules, while others, such as the above-mentioned newspoems, reach out to readers to make them alternately forget and appreciate the rules of their construction.

One danger of working with rules is the rule of taking a constraint to the limit. That is, to tap the potential of a particular constraint, a writer tries to test all of the possibilities such a constraint offers. After spending time on a project, it's tempting to publish the outtakes as well as the more refined work. Gillespie avoids this pitfall. If he sometimes provides only brief illustrations of constraints that others have applied to more fully realized projects (why attempt lipograms, after Georges Perec wrote a novel without using the letter "e" and Christian Bök wrote a long poem in univocal sections, practically exhausting the words that contain only one kind of vowel), his facility at combining constraints sets and meets additional challenges.

Rather than repel readers by cloaking its procedures, *Table of Forms* invites anyone to participate. This is a generous and welcome addition to the literature of constraints.

*Doug Nufer mostly writes works based on formal constraints. He's the author of five novels and a forthcoming book of poetry, We Were Werewolves (Make Now).*

## A FISH WITH ISSUES

Ryan J. Davidson

### A LIFE ABOVE WATER

Doug Van Gundy

Red Hen Press

<http://www.redhen.org>

80 pages; paper, \$15.95

Not a thing like your painters, those  
Wielders of the brush and the palette knife  
who enter the  
soul through the front door,  
Announcing their arrival with color and  
shape and form...

This quote begins this review because in it, and in his book, Doug Van Gundy acknowledges the limitations of the form, of every form. Painting, though worth a thousand words, is ham-fisted when it comes to the ineffable. Poetry, on the other hand, has to discover a whole different way into the soul. The question being: does this book in fact find that entrance hidden away between the eyes and the brain?

This book is of personal experiences, of the natural world, and of his experiences of the natural world. Van Gundy covers an immense range of subject material, from the proverbial castles in the sky to the grittiest, though not everyday, occurrences of normal life. Van Gundy takes us on a tour of our familiar human landscape, but showing us along the way sights which this reader has never before noticed. Looking at this book, Van Gundy seems most influenced by the transcendentalists, Gary Snyder, Hayden Carruth, and all facets of pop-culture.

With the opening poem, from which one of the lines provides the title for the collection, we see the power of his imagination. In the poem "Keeper," Van Gundy speaks with the voice of a fish that has issues. He imagines what it would be like to be a fish aspiring to live above water, and how a fish might perceive a man fishing—a neatly executed turn on the typical idea of a human wondering what it would be like to live under the water. But more than this, he is not simply twisting a common notion. Van Gundy deals with familial relationships and the issues inherent to them in this poem. His speaker is dealing with a life in which he doesn't know his father, and

so, though he is a fish, he perceives the open air as a father figure. Raising the question: are all powerful figures necessarily good things to aspire to?

This book is split into three sections. The first, "All These Indigestible Parts," deals primarily with the natural world. Van Gundy does this with such diversity one is not, as is often the case for this reader, bored into contemplating the concentric beauty of a sunflower. Instead, we are taken on an anthropomorphic journey through the rites and rituals of the animal world. In the poem "Pipistrelle," Van Gundy takes us into the funeral rites of a bat. This imagining comes complete with dirge, mourners, and a gravestone, of sorts.

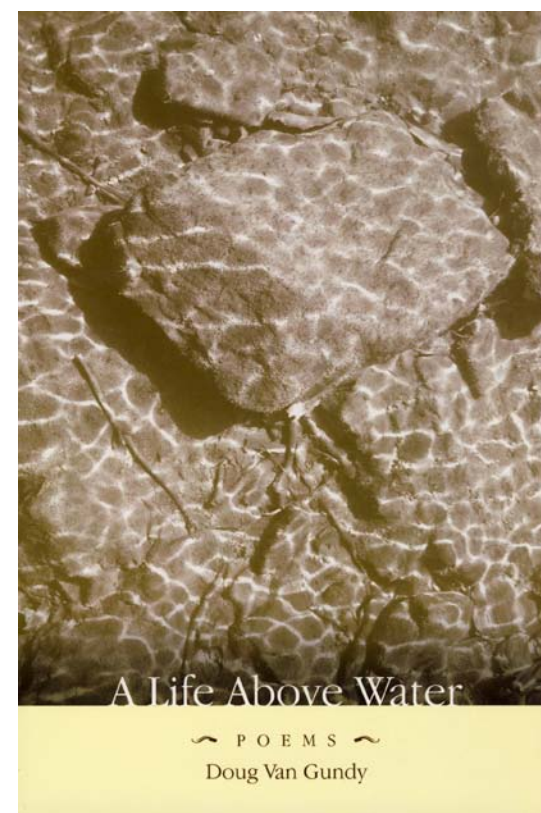
To come full circle, we also have a scene of re-birth. The speaker in the poem "Owl Pellet" is slowly and carefully disassembling the remains of a mouse. As the speaker finds each constituent part, he thinks of the life of this mouse, and in turn of the nature of life. How carefully put together things are and that one, or more, element that brings life. How even if he could put each piece back together, it wouldn't be enough to return life to these remains.

*Van Gundy has made a fine entrance  
into the literary world with  
his first book.*

The second section, "Fellowship and Baked Goods," addresses, less allegorically than the first section, the issues of humanity's humanity. Where in one poem Van Gundy talks about a grandmother's recipes in "Teaching Eighth Grade Math," he gives his own recipe for making adolescents whole adults. Again Van Gundy acknowledges the "made-for-TV movie" aspects of a poem such as this. By acknowledging this possible issue, I feel that he prevents the poem from becoming preachy or overbearing. It strikes this reader more like a reminder of how many pitfalls there are in life than a "make everyday count" pedantic poem.

The third and final section, "The Great Slow-ing," is the most personal of the three. More importantly, this final section is both the best and worst of the three. Van Gundy is honest in these poems, brutally so at times, but also coquettishly squirmy at others.

In the poem titled "Earshot," we can see the worth of Van Gundy as a poet and as a human being. Blending the subjects of this poem, Nazi atrocities



as seen in a movie with the report of a sibling being raped relayed by telephone, with the physical sensation of grasping a phone so hard one finds it unlikely it'll ever be released, is a perfect example of Van Gundy's force. Compared to this last piece, the poem "The Party" is at best half-baked and at worst semi-political doggerel. This reader gets the feeling of an almost finished poem; even the sentiment Van Gundy seems to be trying to convey strikes a little off kilter as though it were not quite complete. It seems as though there were no real emotion driving the poem. Van Gundy couldn't miss the opportunity to take a stab at the "man," so inserted this poem. In this reader's opinion, this poem is the weakest of the lot.

Overall this is a book of fine craftsmanship. Van Gundy has made a fine entrance into the literary world with his first book. However, reading this collection, one begins to feel it is more a gathering of individual pieces than a work. The thread to unify these poems is stretched so thin at times as to become translucent. Not to say that his book isn't worth reading if for no other reason than the diversity of the book will allow every reader to find a poem to claim is the best in the book.

*Ryan J. Davidson is a Scottish American poet living in New York. He spends his time.*

## THE WORLD OF FEMINIST ART

Corinne Robins

### GLOBAL FEMINISMS: NEW DIRECTIONS IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Edited by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin

Merrel Publishers

In association with the Brooklyn Museum

<http://www.merrellpublishers.com>

304 pages; paper, \$54.95

On the cover is a picture of two open-mouthed, lipsticked girls no older than twenty by Boryana Rossa from Bulgaria. At the end of the overly ambitious Brooklyn Museum exhibition, one comes to a halt in front of the screen to hear the girls scream in Boryana Rossa's two-minute video "Celebrating the Next Twinkling." The video is both farewell and welcome to the new world of *Global Feminisms*, at once a show, a book, and an exhibition catalogue weighing four pounds. Curated by Linda Nochlin and Maura Reilly, the exhibition also celebrates the 30th anniversary of Women Artists: 1550–1950, the

first large scale historic exhibition of work by women artists mounted by Linda Nochlin and Anne Harris at the Brooklyn Museum back in 1976. Women Artists: 1550–1950 went on to serve as a basis for beginning courses in the history of women artists throughout America. That was then, and the exhibition was a revolution for twentieth-century feminism that has since become feminisms. Now Linda Nochlin is back with *Global Feminisms*, which is in its way a revolution for the twenty-first century.

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The day after the show's opening, *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith chastised the show for celebrating "[t]he false idea...that there really is such a thing as feminist art, as opposed to art that intentionally or by osmosis reflects or is influenced by feminist thought, of which there is plenty" (March 23, 2007). Smith went on to describe the exhibition as a "confused," "sprawling, sometimes energetic assembly of recent work by nearly 90 women from nearly 50 countries," and noted how exhibition curators Nochlin and Reilly saw fit to mandate that almost all of the women in the show (not in the catalogue) were born after 1960. In this respect, the exhibition and its catalogue go different ways. For example, Nochlin's catalogue essay, "Women Artists Then and Now: Painting and Sculpture and the Image of Self," mixes contemporary and historical figures and offers the reader benchmarks and directions that provide a kind of lifeline to the contemporary art and theory that make up the bulk of the work reproduced in its pages. In her essay, Nochlin starts with the familiar: Rosa Bonheur's nineteenth-century painting *The Horse Fair*, follows it with a detail of Jenny Saville's painting *Passage* from the show and by way of an addendum with a reproduction of Elizabeth Murray's piecemeal painting *Painter's Progress*.

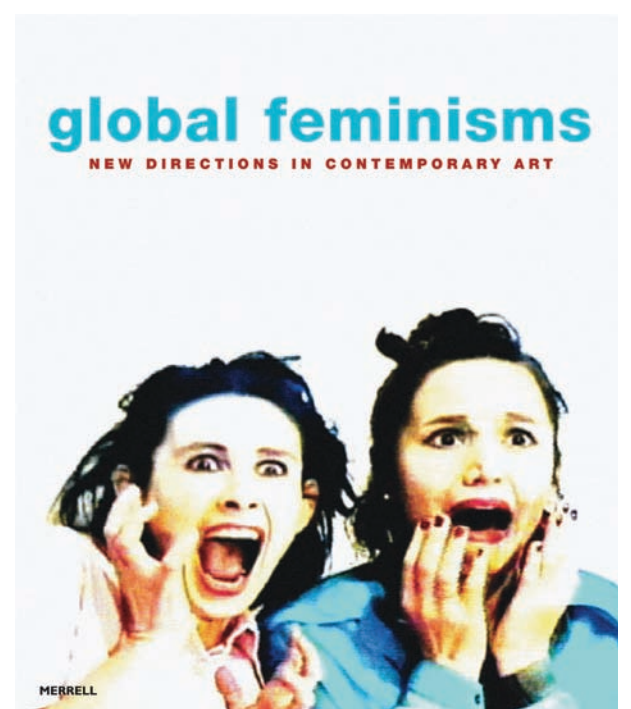
**Maybe it is time for the new generation's viewpoint.**

Turning to sculpture, Nochlin offers reproductions of nineteenth-century sculptor Edmonia Lewis, Harriet Hosmer, and Camille Claudel, and, in the next breath, reviews of twentieth-century sculpture by Eva Hesse, Kiki Smith, and Louise Bourgeois—all works that are familiar and loved and have a personal, individual quirkiness. But young girls are reaching out to the crowds they live among, all of them left adrift among the masses of videos, photographs, and feminist theory.

Art is supposed to surprise and deprive us of our bearings. And these older artists do not relate to the images global feminisms are offering by way of new information. The catalogue and the exhibition both bristle with complex translations and interpretations, and Nochlin's final effort to catch up with the younger artists culminates in brief mentions of younger sculptors like Patricia Piccinini and Lee Buis.

In short, the two parts, twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminisms are a bad match. To bring these two together would require an exhibition twice as large. Meanwhile, *Global Feminisms* is in itself a large-scale survey consisting of more than 100 women artists from some 50 countries that manages to bring off an instant immersion into the new mores of twenty-first-century manners. The four thematic sections of the show swing from "Life Cycles" to "Identities" (gender identities), then to "Politics" and "Emotions," replete with photographs, videos, sculptures, and a scattering of painting. Co-curator of *Global Feminisms*, Maura Reilly, who is also curator of the new Feminist Center of the Brooklyn Museum, explains, "we are attempting to construct a definition of 'feminist art' that is as broad and flexible as possible." But for better and worse, her emphasis is curiously narrow. The works in the show are all political and sexual. There are lots of mediations on sexual identity, and the exclusion of older feminists leaves the emphasis almost exclusively on photography, video, and performance with an emphasis on shock value.

But it is the twenty-first century, and maybe it is time for the new generation's viewpoint. One of my art students from Pratt in her report on the show wrote, "I've been waiting the entire 20 years I've been alive to celebrate being a woman, and it's about time. Thank you Brooklyn Museum." Another championed a two-minute video loop of a beautiful woman (Sigalit Landau) hula-hooping with barbed wire in front of a stormy gray ocean, the barbed wire digging into her skin. Students characterized



other works as "both gruesome and breathtaking." Questions of nature and nurture and violence against women seemed unavoidable subject matter. Women artists from Japan and India, young men from Turkey, a lesbian performer dressed as a bearded Hasid—one leafs through the catalogue to learn, for example, about post-totalitarian art: Eastern and Central European. The catalogue is bringing home to the small Western provincial art world of galleries and magazines news from the broader spectrum. It is opening up doors and windows to the outside world. Among its heavy weight of multiple statements, theoretical pronouncements, photographs, and reproductions, new young feminists are making themselves heard.

*Corinne Robins, art critic and poet, teaches at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and is the author of Pluralist Era: American Art 1968–81 (Harper Icon Books) and five books of poetry, most recently Today's Menu from Marsh Hawk Press. She is also a long-time contributing editor to ABR.*

**DAPPER HUMANISM**

**Kevin Prufer**

**OOGA-BOOGA**

Frederick Seidel

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

<http://www.fsgbooks.com>

112 pages; cloth, \$24.00; paper, \$13.00

A recent, rapturous *New York Magazine* article (December 11, 2006) profiles the "hopelessly rich" Frederick Seidel thusly:

The man is sumptuous. He hangs on the edge of a red-leather banquette behind his regular corner table at Cafe Luxembourg, cradling a second espresso, and his ash-colored suit—made to measure by Richard Anderson of 13 Savile Row—fits so perfectly that it looks like it was dusted onto his slender frame with a box of confectioners' sugar.

Reading *Ooga-Booga*, I imagine him meditating on his cuticles, his mortality, or the cut of another

man's coat, a thin-lipped smile—is it benevolence or disapproval?—and want badly to dislike him. After all, the Seidel of these poems exudes a kind of opulence and dissolution that is distinctly fall-of-Rome: loathsome, fascinating, self-satisfied, and very, very sparkly.

***The Seidel of these poems exudes a kind of opulence and dissolution that is distinctly fall-of-Rome.***

But the truth is that, at his best, the generally awful-minded Seidel is also an insightful, technically superb, and often deeply humane poet, able to conflate the luxuries I imagine decorate his life with searing, social commentary or acute introspection. In "On Being Debonair," for instance, Seidel tells us,

It is a joy to sit alone  
Without a book.  
I use myself up being fine while I dine.  
I am a result of the concierge at the Carlyle.  
I order a bottle of Bordeaux.  
I am a boulevard of elegance  
In my well-known restaurants.

Lest we become too comfortable with the wine and

the Carlyle and all that, however, the speaker's mind drifts first to Iraq, where "[t]he desert this time of year / Is troops in desert camouflage. / I dine with my Carlyle smile," then to an unnamed woman, who tries to soothe him. It is here, when we expect a return to opulence and comfort, that Seidel offers us something richer and more interesting. "I will cut your heart out," he writes,

And drink the rubies and eat the coral.  
I like the female for its coral.  
I go to Carnegie Hall  
To make her open her mouth onstage and  
scream.

*Ooga-Booga* is, in fact, punctuated by such screams, moments of rage, and fear rising from beneath the brocade of these poems. Where we don't expect it, the specter of battle in Iraq, of senseless military brutality, rises ("Winter, Spring, Baghdad, Fall," he interjects in one poem), then dissipates. In one of the best poems in the collection, "The Bush Administration," Seidel drifts from one surreal, terrifying moment to another, coming closest to clear editorial when he writes,

The United States of America preemptively

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eats the world.  
The doctrine of eat lest you be eaten  
Is famished, roars  
And tears the heads off before its own is  
sawed off.

Elsewhere, Seidel meditates on sex and, frequently simultaneously, his own impending death. In one poem, the poet's mortality appears personified as a kind of twisted Fred Astaire, "Dapper in hats, / Dapper in spats, / Espousing white tie and tails or a tailcoat and striped trousers." Elsewhere, observing an attractive, much younger woman, he writes, "We kiss. / It's almost incest when it gets to this." Or, in a perverse sonnet that begins "A naked woman my age is a total nightmare," he tells us:

I hate the old couples on their walkers giving  
Off odors of love, and in City Diner eating a  
ray  
Of hope, and then paying and trembling back  
out on Broadway,

Drumming and dancing, chanting something  
nearly unbearable,  
Spreading their wings in order to be more  
beautiful and more terrible.

At its strongest, there's something spookily reminiscent of the very best of Stevie Smith in Seidel's frequently arrhythmic poetry—a deceptively conversational tone, always hinting at the profundity and the void, while maintaining a surprisingly musical surface. These poems trip along in a faux-naive, delightfully colloquial mode, managing, generally, to twist themselves into disturbing little rhymes at the

ends of lines. Listening to the poems, one can't know where the rhymes will fall—the lines vary in length from just a few to more than twenty syllables—and, so, Seidel keeps us a little off balance, a little uncomfortable and tentative. And, while his style is mostly winkingly plainspoken, suggesting a kind of innocence (often as if these many notions merely entered the poet's head moments before he jotted them down), periods of intense lyricism suggest the craftsman behind the work.

In all, however, the book is only partly successful. When Seidel focuses on a theme or a moment with economy and grace, he is at his best. But when he feels the urge to divide his gaze among many things, his flights of whimsy become a little clumsy, and a little obscure. "Kill Poem," for instance, contains a vast series of brilliant observations, but finally remains elusive. Is it a sick kind of *ars poetica*? A political screed? A meditation on consumerism and what it means to be civilized? It partly succeeds on all these fronts, but never really amounts to that much on any. Or "The Death of the Shah," which tumbles through so many scenes, so many impressions that, finally, the wandering of Seidel's mind is more frustrating than it is interesting. By the time we've passed through the Shah's dalliances, a visit to him by the poet's doctor, a disquisition on psychoanalysis, a visit to Ghana, a discussion of race horses, a weird, tightly rhymed sequence ("I call him Nancy / He is so fancy"), a memory of the "Duck an Duckess of Windsor"—and more to go!—well, Seidel can only take his wit and technical brilliance so far. Ultimately, though, the ten or fifteen excellent poems in this collection—among them "Broadway



Melody," "From Nijinsky's Diary," and "Grandson Born Dead"—suggest a fascinating, technically masterful poet.

Kevin Prufer's most recent books are *Fallen from a Chariot* (Carnegie Mellon, 2005) and *National Anthem* (Four Way Books, 2008). With Wayne Miller, he is now editing *The New European Poets for Graywolf Press*.

## COLONIZING THE FUTURIST REPRESENTATION

Uppinder Mehan

### FOLLIES OF SCIENCE: 20TH CENTURY VISIONS OF OUR FANTASTIC FUTURE

Eric Dregni and Jonathan Dregni

Speck Press  
<http://www.speckpress.com>  
128 pages; paper, \$19.00

This is not your grandpa's book of criticism, but if your grandpa was a nerd back in his day, he would certainly recognize the look and feel of *Follies of Science: 20th Century Visions of Our Fantastic Future*. If you know only a modicum about the issues the book tackles, then you can certainly enjoy the full-color images and accompanying casual, sometimes humorous, text. This can be an extremely frustrating book, however, if you're searching for a thorough treatment of any topic related to the representation of the future. The work is best seen as an entertaining introduction to the hopes and fears many in the twentieth century had of the future.

The physical appearance of the book sets it apart from a conventional work of criticism. It uses the bold colors of the cover art of many Golden Age science fiction magazines (indeed, many of the images reproduced in the book are the covers of magazines such as *Tales of Tomorrow* and *Amazing Stories*). You can get some sense of the book's layout through the almost 1:1 ratio of photos and illustrations to pages:

115 (great majority in color) to 128 pages.

The book is divided into chapters on transportation, robots, war, cities, medicine, space living, and a final chapter on contemporary predictions. The introduction promises an examination of the *Weltanschauung* of the visionaries of the future. But realizing the impossibility of fully capturing their perspective, the authors (Eric Dregni and Jonathan Dregni) settle for a coffee-table presentation of the visual field of a mid-twentieth-century inhabitant of the West. On the whole, the visions of the future are presented objectively but always present is a mild strain of paternalistic wonder at the naivety of the prognosticators and writers.

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The introduction to each chapter is light and mostly serviceable in outlining the chief issues and responses, but chasing the humorous aspect sometimes results in error. For example, the introduction to the chapter "Space Colonies" attempts to stress the sharp discontinuity in velocity between the horse-and-carriage age and the rocket age. But seeking to be light and entertaining, the Dregnis forget an important mode of transport.

The fastest a human traveled before the

invention of the rocket sled was the speed of a horse, more properly, the speed of a panicked horse about to be overtaken by a predator. Thirty-five miles an hour, let's say. A *Geo Prizm* takes about four seconds to surpass that speed, less on a well-sloped freeway on-ramp.

The error, of course, is the omission of railways. The error, in itself, may be forgivable in a primer, but, unfortunately, it points to a tendency found throughout the book: the presentation of the relation between past and future technologies as a progression from the current form to another desired form. I get little sense of the awareness of the multifariousness of differing technologies existing simultaneously at any point in history—cultures are always immersed in dominant, residual, and emergent technologies (to borrow from Raymond Williams).

Most visions of the future had technology enabling the construction of immense domed cities. The trend of urbanization in the early twentieth century would see its logical end in automated farms inhabited only by robots with the entire population living in weather-controlled and landscaped skyscrapers. The Dregnis do a serviceable job in bringing together the desire for labor-saving devices with the planned communities of Owens, the Shakers, and 1960s style communes, but they stop far short. There is no mention of the planned cities of Le Corbusier—arguably one of the most influential designers because of his global reach. One of the grandest attempts at city

—Mehan continued on next page

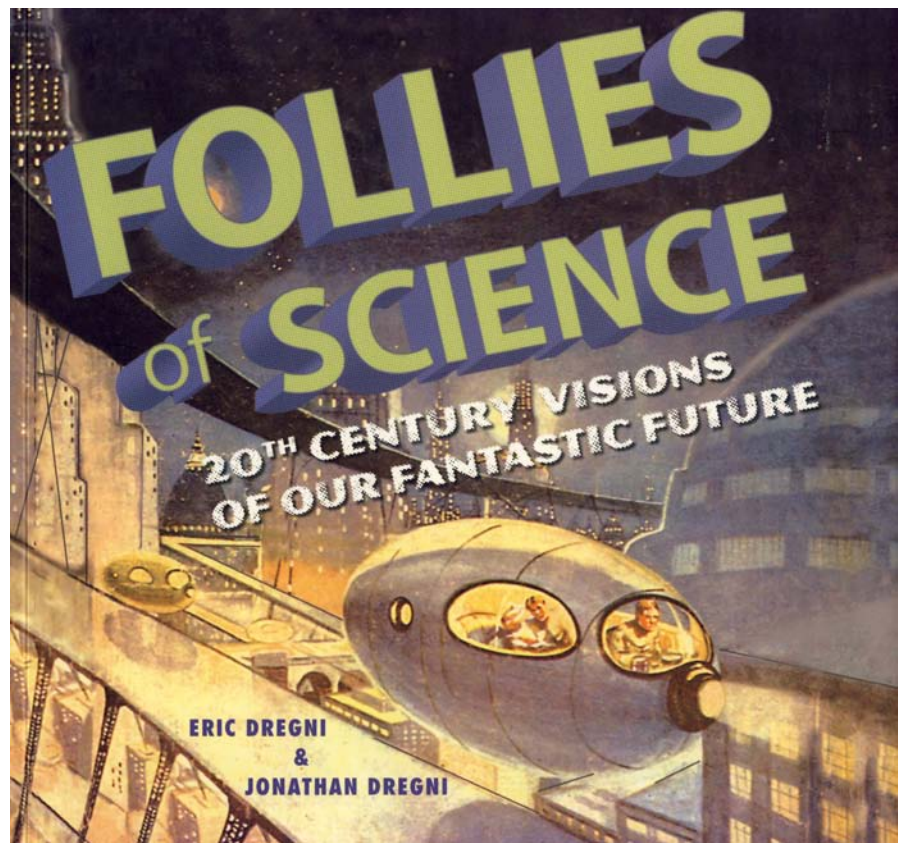
designing and construction is ignored—nothing about Oscar Niemeyer’s Brasilia, and nothing about the Athens Charter which set forth the principles of most rational city planning.

The most thoughtful chapters are the ones on computers and robots, and war. As the Dregnis point out, robots have a strong grip on the popular imagination far in excess of their actuality since their very existence produces an existential frisson. We are drawn to and repulsed by that which mimics us. A page on contemporary education inserted into a discussion of our desire for robot butlers claims that most of our pedagogical practices seek to turn our children into robots capable of echoing back to us the truths we have seen fit to tell them so that even as we create robots in our image we recreate ourselves in theirs. The chapter on war quickly acknowledges the truism that it is the spur of technological innovation, and the chapter competently juxtaposes two opposing tendencies. One arm of weapons research looks to find ways to allow the quick deployment of massive armies; the other arm seeks to make one soldier formidable enough to carry out entire operations. Even in these chapters, there are curious omissions. Though the Dregnis tell us the etymology of the word “robot,” they fail to mention Karl Capek’s play *R.U.R* (1921) where the word first makes its appearance. While Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Philip K. Dick, and Jean Baudrillard make an appearance, there is no mention of Donna Haraway.

I’ve focused on particular frustrations, and they can be overlooked because of the introductory nature of the work, but a work that makes liberal use of art from the Golden Age of science fiction shouldn’t

miss a trajectory that has important consequences for the representation of the future. Although Hugo Gernsback, the father of science fiction, is mentioned, and William Gibson, the father of cyberpunk fiction, is mentioned, the Dregnis make no mention of Gibson’s important short story “The Gernsback Continuum.” In Gibson’s 1981 story, the protagonist shows us the distance between the “flying wing-liner” and domed gleaming cities of the science fiction writers before mid-century, and the post-apocalyptic present inhabited by the hero. Gibson’s story marks an important point of departure in American representations of technophilic futures while underscoring the dystopian strain that has been as equal a fictional response to industrialism and science as the optimism of the Marinetti-inspired futurists.

The last chapter, “Fast Forward to 2050,” leans heavily on the ideas of a group of futurists from the Dregnis’s home state of Minnesota. Judging by their vision, almost every aspect of life (homes, transportation, medicine, space travel) will be transformed by the wonders of nanoscience. Fittingly, the Dregnis leave the last word to futurists without explicit or



implicit commentary—there will be time enough to shake our heads at them in the future.

*Uppinder Mehan has published criticism on post-colonial and science-fiction writers. He recently co-edited an anthology of new postcolonial science fiction and is currently at work on a critical assessment of postcolonial science fiction. He teaches at Victoria College.*

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