

Talisman 36/37 (Fall 2008/Winter 2009)

JACK KIMBALL

On Carter Ratcliff, *Arrivederci Modernismo* (Libellum 2007)

If you want to start a list of living writers who are still-belatedly influential, put Carter Ratcliff at the top. More, there aren't a lot of poets after NY Generation One who have sustained conversations with painters / artists but again Ratcliff would be at the top of this list. Loosely associated with Generation Two / Three, like many in the cohort (John Godfrey, Tony Towle, Susie Timmons, Ted Greenwald, others) Ratcliff moves in nonliterary, nonacademic circles that keep his name off many poets' lips. Erupting with poststructural play, *Arrivederci Modernismo*, first published in 1974, is central to practice in 2008, imparting epic-length proof of how verse feeds into and off art production, fashion, and caprice, one of only a few lyric demonstrations of the interdisciplinary passing of narrowly interpreted domains and strictures. The voice is continuous, discursive; the understanding is particulate and anti-reductionist, except for ardor's sake.

*I loved the good-bye we arranged for bathos, and I wondered then,
bathetically, if love was ever the point. Not to ask that purifying
question as I'm doing now, but to live it -- that's as close as I ever got
to your elegance, your circularity.*

Rounding this circularity in a three-part Note (copyrighted 2007) to the poem, Ratcliff asks, "So what is the point?" His answer is surprisingly directive. "The point is to lead one, in the course of one's reading, to an idea of oneself. Who am I, who must I be, to be responding this way?" Picture 35 years ago a heavy-breathing researcher-of-the-self making song out of

postmodernist propositions and other art theory, and you begin to see why Ratcliff's poetry is material now and why its influence continues to expand.

--

On Laynie Browne, *Daily Sonnets* (Counterpath Press 2007)

Laynie Browne lets us in. We're welcomed into the everyday practice of composition surrounded by a household of children who come leaping and bouncing with language and insights for the poems. Browne listens voraciously to what's happening and writes it down in 14-line experiments, collages and collaborations, as she calls them. She also picks up some smart reading and takes that in, as well. She didn't have to, but in her notes she gives us the details of composition. "This poem was written while listening to Kit Robinson read at Moe's..." Or "This sonnet is collaged from Tolstoy's *War and Peace*." For two "After-Shower" sonnets Browne tells us she was inspired by Bernadette Mayer. In addition to listening and collaging, she fills us in on chance procedures using available tools, the dictionary, mistranslation, and homophonic translation, among others. But as is often the case in these matters, the more Browne overhears, borrows, adapts, or translates, the more her own voices and practices are evinced, fabricating on innumerable cylinders, as in the sonnet "Pre-Election Lunar Eclipse," a title worth contemplating as it gets swallowed by these first lines:

*Darkening acclaim of oblong
Ecru, pertaining to edelweiss
The past participle of most rapturous
Radar or sonar, economical
Currents at variants with the light [...]*

I count seven, eight, or more ideas merged as though effortlessly and out of necessity. That is what *Daily Sonnets* lets us in on the most, the refinement of continuing process as necessity, a real how-to.

--

On Brian Kim Stefans, *Kluge: A Meditation and Other Works* (Roof 2007)

Driving fast is natural as coming of age; we train to accelerate into and out of lines of the unimportant, to cut off the meek, aiming to take the attitudes we learn beyond the highways as we spill into every urban rotary ("numero uno infinitesimal"), every street and avenue with a dedicated lane ("which needs no syntax"), every 4-way stop ("1 2 buckle my shoe / 3 4 buckle my shoe").

Perpetually on a roll ("Meow, meow, meow, meow. Meow, meow..."), spinning off backdrops ("Noo lyin deef tae daith..."), one reads Brian Kim Stefans and gets carsick in a cab twisting through Jersey, say, or NYC. Driver's racing to show you movement. The third word in the poem "Whistler" is notably Britanic, a slow-down verb: "The globe shags the land / of light's / discrete / damaging." But the poem's overall speed says so much about American innovation abroad, about representational art, anti-academic overachievement, and remnants of sentiment. "What an / extremity verge," that old hipster Whistler, Stefans says. He ends the essay, "He really viled out."

Stefans's title poem from the book is attractive online (<http://arras.net/kluge>) where the future of gaming, albeit fraught with imperatives, is more apparent.

The rules are simple: read the poem (a novella, really, or a prose poem with characters) as cleanly as possible, and with as much MEANING of a story-like nature collected (like twigs in a basket) by when you are done. YOU keep score. To get to the next "page" sequentially, scrape the text, knocking down letters efficiently so that the incoming letters arrive at a clean page -- if not, what will result is a messy palimpsest [...]

Hey, twig -- I'm paraphrasing -- brand this text if you can. Everything is "simple" (for a "post-human") and if you don't "get it" you'll be so terribly, metaphorically sorry. Keep score, watch it, it's fun!