

## JACK KIMBALL

### Coultas • Mayer • Lyons

Brenda Coultas, *A Handmade Museum* (Coffee House Press, 2003); Bernadette Mayer: *Indigo Bunting* (Zasterle, 2004); Kimberly Lyons: *Saline* (Instance Press, 2005).

Poets can be teachers even when emotional or aesthetic withdrawal visors them from the artfulness of their lessons. An equivalence to pedagogy is assumed, let's say, when a poet's language proceeds from a lived praxis. This can be conveyed topically through a persona, the habit of an identity picking up trash, for example, an alertness that comes complete with a meta-view while bunking on a Second Street bum bed pad, awash in social history and poli-science. Nearly half of Brenda Coultas's *A Handmade Museum* is replete with such convention, comprised of "The Bowery Project," subtitled "An Experiment in Public Character." The poems give up a first-person I.D. or narrator who, potentially woeful, develops "a joy of dumpsters," cold trash, garbage, puke. We find her squatting down to pick up damp, ruined t-shirts from the street. Then there are the cardboard boxes, black plastic bags, and shards everywhere, which the narrator transforms into human multiples, waking up, "seeing garbage with new eyes" even when 'off-duty,' taking the train to Long Island, as she observes a "perfectly in-your-face Hamptons punk-gangster" yelling to his "plain" girlfriend, "This is the worst day of my life, you miserable bitch."

Coultas acknowledges dependence on a timeline and half-wishful sleights, "I stack things up. I don't think about it, I put blinders on but hope through accumulation they'll form a pattern out of chaos." The patterns do cohere and in the poem "Bowery Mind," for instance, we distinguish their crossover pathos from factual reporting — a man carries "a deflated blow-up doll in a basket . . . to make a statement," as the man informs the narrator, a statement that encapsulates broader concentric designs: "people moved away . . . came to cities, all saying this is what I did . . . for posterity. Along came me saying this is what I did for poetry. A lot of people came here all at once, this is how and why my tenement exists." There are just a few moments (in some of the non-garbage material) when the language veers more to the piquant

rather than not. In the poem “The Human Museum” Coultas inserts a songlike bio, starting with a day of birth, “I be a small girl my bone ringlets not yet fused,” concluding (I think a bit off-key), “I’m a spokesmodel for God. Let me in. / I’m God’s spokesmodel, / Please forgive me.” More frequent, Coultas assumes her robust ‘public character’ by breaking through “the anonymity of the page,” often in disarming, direct address to her readers: “I learned to write so I could describe the world / the birdhouse is empty / say something beautiful about it.” Nudging us into participatory lyricism, as it were, compelled to declare, “I am intentionally writing this for you,” not content with passive readership in shared chaos and pattern, “Brenda Coultas covered you in quilts while you were singing.”

If we follow this crossover pedagogy, one of participation and intersubjectivity, it could be axiomatic that appreciating, much less passing on, compositional technique in poetry requires procedures through which selfhood is massively displaced. Such exuberant understanding is all the more in operation for a poet who knows she writes to teach. Over four decades Bernadette Mayer’s practice has been to lead by modeling; to get real about (that is, to specify) the facts concerning her “self” and what else is around; and to propose new ways to compose a poetry about fact checking and speaking for what’s there and what’s not. All the while, Mayer’s authority (or authorship) is mediated through discrete, expansive procedures that constitute a recursive meta-narrative on composition, a repeated looking- and going-back in the telling of her self as poetry.

*Indigo Bunting* offers a string of extensions in time for such telling, a perfect-bound brief for incident against purpose occasioning just about everything, including poetry, especially the poetry of conflated pleasures. Here Mayer’s facts speak up for the tall and short of breath, for broth and other food stuffs, for drink, for love, and for the making of love, broth and poems. Other facts of hers touch on or marshal against external forces that constrain (“Is Bernadette consigned to ostracism because / Bernadette makes writing with pen in public . . .”), against *Newsday*, for instance, against war, against Bush.

The more intriguing parts to Mayer’s liking are parabolic — that is, they swerve toward and then away from standard narratives — and the affect is at once self-indulgent, spidery-seductive and exemplarily didactic. In a poem titled “Maple Syrup Sonnet #?” of triple-sonnet

length Mayer linearizes “i dreamed if i wrote prose paragraphs / and from each a poem / i could teach / everybody to write poetry.” The poem spreads over six additional stanzas of serial subject matter, hay fields and poems, with italicized lead-ins, such as “*questionable poem*,” “*better poem*,” etc. The argument-for-praxis is summed up in the final stanza: “*new poem*: / THE FIELDS were filled / with rectangles random as poems / now not” – an alfresco experience as well as a demonstration from a persona’s interior that one can write to go on, or as she suggests in libertine bursts in her final poem, “Sonnet to John Fisk”: one can write and live for a “besotted” and “different world,” a world that has not quite yet happened where there is “everything spun,” and where one can “open the bottle of thought.”

As Coultas’s public character and Mayer’s dreamier side intimate, thought cannot be merely self-involved or hyper-focused on realia to conger variations in aesthetic temporality. Kimberly Lyons proves that point exponentially, passing on a poetics of disorientation through enactment of what film critics call un-happened events. Even more so than was demonstrated in her first book *Abracadabra*, Lyons’s skill realizing the erotica of sense data leads *Saline* into spatial and temporal confusions where domesticity is transcended, not as an impediment, but as a co-star with other a-sequenced entities in what’s beyond, “hearing angels,” a future, a past where “hot peppers stunk up / with ham . . . perforated . . . a giant hole [that] drifts open / in the sky.”

This is the field of ‘phantom matter,’ a gravitational force that Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit note in Jean Luc Goddard’s allusions to the other side to visible matter, a seesawing parabola (again!) pulling the universe together and pulling it apart. A phantom-something is not nothing, it’s there but how so? Playing with it can be a tedious if not disorienting challenge to compose poetry to, or as Goddard’s poetess puts it, “seeing the invisible is exhausting.” Like Coultas and Mayer, Lyons dives into her mega topic, chaos, telling the story of her poetry, a “tremulous uncertainty / of the broken sentence chain.” Hers is an erotica of iconic tropes, of “a ghost fish” with “ungathered / intentions,” as well as a poetics of idealization on a “tangled tract” waiting for “inconstant human possibility.” This is inconstancy that holds the present to a past and a future, just as a “baby’s fingernail” holds feelings both “enormous” and “transparent,” equal to “Saline reservoirs” overflowing with “the kind of life / that needs no light” and that comes out

of “old ice.”

Disorientation here runs more deeply than figures and ideals. Lyons’s pleasuring through artifice streams her entire project through a continuous present motioning toward her readers’s engagement with the un-happened. To illustrate this grandiose statement, if I may, I’ll point to my experience at the library, following up on one of Lyons’s figures, a reference in the poem “Soap” to a text titled *The Crystal Book*. As I came to realize, this is a bogus text. When I entered the title digitally in the subject data field, I found a number of mis-adventures as alternatives, including (1) Crystal, David, *The Stories of English*; (3) *Consort of Musicke*, the world of English ayres and madrigals [sound recording]; (5) Wonder, Stevie, *Talking Book* [sound recording]; and (8) Shakespeare, William, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream: Texts and Contexts*. To prove each option is somehow germane to Lyons’s ideas in *Saline* would necessitate a longer review, so I’ll only suggest the following – (1) the story of English, for instance, seems reflected in her ‘shadows of Greek postures’; a response to (3) an English ayre might be ‘the gradual of / Eleanor of Brittany, 14th century’; Stevie Wonder talking and making book could be, like me, one of the “People [who] are realized only partially.” Still, if I stick with (8) Shakespeare, I get that dizzy feeling I am being talked to right now, part of the continuous present in the short piece ‘Soap,’ the sort of predictive, time-travel-y mischief poetry readers prize:

I was looking for you  
or more correctly, your words . . .

pulled from the stacks: ‘a new poem’ by Wm. Shakespeare huh?

I’m enveloped now by “Soap” that anticipates my taking, in this case, specific action like explicating ‘a new poem’ through my search at the library! (Huh, indeed.) Granted, Lyons cuts through the travel mystery, admits her crystal book doesn’t exist, yet a reader might take this un-happened event (happening now) more personally when one reads, “absence of it yields / to . . . arrival.” The reader is further instructed that arriving is a way of “contending,” “looking around . . . / I imagine the words / are looking for me also.”

Lyons practices a Platonic epistemology via 21st-century metaphysics in which one’s arrival at words is hard-wired self-inquiry “inherently

without prestige," *enamored* of the magic "round room" in dailiness, like reading a book backwards, routine conceit that "disperses . . . a grid of light ' where there is 'presence between / nothings." Tangled, convoluted, "I hate this Sunday consciousness," Lyons says, offering "a violet empyrean's contraption of radiant circles" made round and plausible within the "background in the colorlessness" and seeming limitless as "the universe cavorts thus."