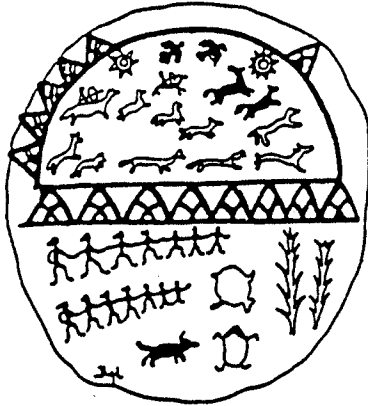


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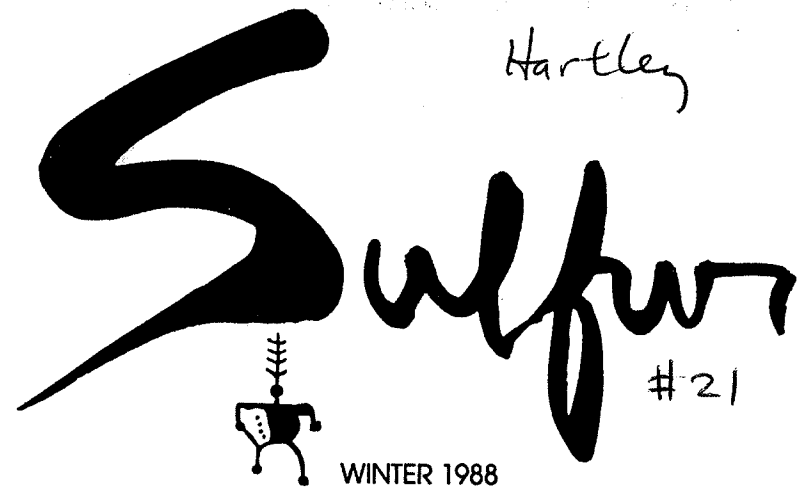
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SULFUR magazine has its main offices c/o English Department, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti MI 48197 (telephone: 313/483-9787). Subscriptions are \$15 a year (3 issues) for individuals, \$22 for institutions; a single copy is \$6. Current issue is Vol. VII, #3. Foreign subscriptions, including Canada, add \$3 for book rate mail, \$12 for air mail postage. Make checks to SULFUR in U.S. currency. Back issues (except #1) are available. CLAIMS FOR MISSING NUMBERS can be honored only within 3 months after publication. No unsolicited manuscripts will be returned unless accompanied by SASE. ISSN #: 0730-305X.

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DESIGN AND TYPOGRAPHY BY BARBARA MARTIN
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A LITERARY TRI-QUARTERLY OF THE WHOLE ART

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- COVER: LYDIA DONA / *The Topographic Orientation We Are Supposed To Project Into the Fabric of Coral Depends Upon Particles and Codes of Desire / 1987 / Oil & acrylic on canvas / 72 x 100 inches / Courtesy of Luhring Augustine & Hodes Gallery, NYC***
Photo: Erik Landsberg
- 1988 issues of *Sulfur* are made possible in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Now")

In the best of these poems language begins to take its rightful place.

—DON BYRD

BARRETT WATTEN ON POETRY AND POLITICS: AN INTERVIEW BY GEORGE HARTLEY

GH Would you explain the title of your book, *Total Syntax*?

BW The idea was, "What I want is a more total syntax." That is, the syntax of a work of art could be imagined to be inherent in the work, but a more *total* syntax would relate the work to orders of experience outside it. When "total syntax" is separated from that sentence, however, it becomes a little curious; how could a syntax being total be very workable or interesting? In a way, it could mean a kind of infinite expansion, as with a letter in which the last line of the address is "the mind of God"—where do you stop? It could also be, like, *total* syntax—all syntax, no content—where there's no room for substance because everything is just relation—and that's not what I meant. Looking at the title by itself, you have a kind of polysemy that implies an interest in extending the implications of art from the work into the world, but one that also begs the questions of closure, totalization. And in fact I'm not arguing for a totalization of art in political, psychological, or linguistic senses.

More specifically, it's the title of the chapter on Robert Smithson and Clark Coolidge, and in those two artists I'm seeing ways of extending the work into the world that are constitutive of the works themselves. The discussion of scale and metaphor in Smithson is about how Smithson's work created a syntax of site/nonsite, in-the-gallery/outside-the-gallery, a syntax-of-materials/a syntax-of-locations. With Coolidge there is a temporal extension, a sort of romantic questioning that extends the work in time metonymically. Both necessitate a larger syntax by virtue of what they are doing at the point of production of their work.

I don't think the questions that are raised by the book are settled in any particular way. By the end of the book, a "total syntax" turns out to be an open-ended one. How can you have a totalizing open-endedness? It seems to me a structural instability.

GH When you say, "I want a more total syntax," that seems to imply that people previously haven't been approaching a work through all the dimensions of syntax. Is there any person or school or line of theory that you had in mind that you were countering?

BW Yes—the habits of reading you learn in your education, the "Let's look at this line" kind of close reading. There's a tremendous amount of authority that's being argued in the practice of close readings. It's not just a question of how to read but of how to measure oneself experientially against the poem, a question of measuring one's validity in terms of craft that begins in the process of reading and ends in reproducing the workshop poem. I don't write that kind of poetry, but the charged environment of close reading and of measuring oneself against decisions involved in writing at that level I think were influential—if you can see them as being argued negatively in my work against the kind of poetry they were supposed to produce. There was a kind of resistance to that method, and at the same time, "I'll go them one better. I'll show the professors how to read." Zukofsky's another example of a writer who took the habits of the academy and returned them in a different style of writing.

GH I'd like to talk more about the academy. What has the reception been so far? So you think the academy as a whole would be open to the things you're proposing and the works you are examining in *Total Syntax*?

BW Well, there's currently a project in the academy to dismantle poetics that involve only a syntax within the poem—where if there's a syntax outside the poem, it's the poet's role as professional or as country gentleman. It seems to me that there are people working critically in the academy who would be interested in what we are doing because it is, I think, relevant to thinking about relations between language, psychology, and social orders, and so forth. But it may turn out that even though there are critical positions that *should* be interested in our work, there's no guarantee that they won't just lead to a validation of the role of the professional, and therefore to the kind of poetry written in conservative forms by those aspiring to similar roles.

The question is, What kind of literary culture does the academy want? And I think that's a question the academy needs to deal with. If you look at the representation of poetry in *The New York Review of Books* or *The American Poetry Review*, it's often what I would call nonserious. There's a good reason for nonserious work being produced in the academy. What it would finally take for the academy to be interested in what we are doing would be for it to be equally interested in renegotiating intellectual roles outside its areas of expertise. There will be a complicity if there's a larger social reason for it. But it seems we are entering a neoconservative environment in which many who have invested in contextual aesthetics are

rethinking their positions. So I don't think there's any guarantee that the academy finally is going to validate our work.

GH I was wondering, did you have in mind the notion of total syntax while you were writing *Progress*? The external syntax, I guess, is what has been traditionally excluded from consideration. Do you as a poet consciously try to work that dimension in, either in *Progress* or your other works?

BW *Progress*, as is obvious from its title and length, is involved in time, duration, getting from one place to another, willed activity—I want to progress. The temporal duration of writing the poem is being matched against the experience of the time I was living in, June 1982 to May 1983, the Reagan recession. The poem was written over the winter of the darkest year of this recession, an important period in that it was one in which a lot of expectations were being reformulated by virtue of economic constraints. I mean, Reagan had put the screws to the economy. A lot of people were out of work, the job situation was bad, and one was forced to renegotiate expectations in terms of this well-orchestrated psychological/economic campaign.

So the poem was written in this period. One of the things that happens in it is a continual breaking down of its assumptions, almost violently, by undercutting them. There is a fair amount of willful dissociation and undermining of statement that is being built on to create the conditions for statement. The negativity in the construction of the work is in fact what forms the argument of the poem. And this negativity often has the exact effect of sundering the inherence of the poem's own argument, opening it to facts that impinge on it from outside. These are similar to the kinds of negative information you get during an administered psychological campaign such as one might have experienced at that time.

Another parallel example of the social form that influenced the writing of *Progress*, I think, was the media campaign during the hostage crisis, where every day for almost a year we were being fed information that "Your interests are being frustrated! Your interests are being frustrated!"—and that campaign set up Reagan's election. This may have been a replay or reversal of the media's role in the Vietnam War. Later, during the period of the Reagan recession, I think that form was thought to be very successful. There was a constant barrage of negative information—so many people out of work, so many plants closed—coming in at regular intervals. At every interval in which you might have built up a head of steam for your own purposes, recuperate your own argument as it were, there would be another dose of "Things are getting worse. Things are getting worse." Well, either that mimics the logic of the poem [laughs] or the poem is involved with that kind of deferral.

At the same time there was a playing around with information coming in from outside the poem, not only negative information but also the

random, the gratuitous, the way one knows one's situation by grappling not only with relevant "objective" information—trends in the economy and so forth—but also with bizarre, reified facts that still give a picture of what the world is. At the same time that you are getting doses of intentionally negative information, you're also getting news about the Great White Shark that was sighted off Point Reyes or the man who fell on his head onto a drill bit, reversed the drill, and drove himself to the hospital—that was something that came over the news that became part of the poem. And that becomes a metaphor, then, for consciousness [laughs].

GH What's going on with the line structure and the ellipses and so on, especially the variation of indentation?

BW That's just a flexibility that keeps the incremental property of the poem from becoming too predictable. By having a flexible form, by being able to vary where the line breaks, you keep from having a parallelism that would have made the poem impossible to write. It's a structural instability that is constantly breaking in new way and always gives you a choice, "I think I'll break here." In this way the recurrence of the stanza can be fresh enough without a simply incremental association. The ellipses were originally to be read as breaks, saying "Signing off! This transmission has now ended!"—you know, the last line of that story by H.P. Lovecraft where the guy's being eaten by a blob and his hand trails down the page. But when reading I invariably read right through them. The caesurae are the end stops that actually occur in the stanzas, so the ellipses have no meaning except as a physical habit of typing four dots that made me think about breaking the attention.

GH The other night after Nick Piombo's talk [August 11, 1986 at Intersection, San Francisco] many people mentioned that just the way he presented the talk brought up a lot of questions besides what he was saying. And you were asking what sort of effect that presentation, that blankness, would have on readers. Would you explain what's behind your question?

BW He seemed to be saying that there is an inevitable bad outcome to writing that is organized in terms of topic and comment, theme and subject matter—i.e., content. The writer is going to encounter blocks in having to organize his thinking around the topic, and the reader is going to be subordinated to the text. There's going to be a power imbalance between the person reading the text and the person hearing and understanding it. I was saying that it may be true that these kinds of repression are going to exist in writing, but I don't see that an open text, one that isn't organized around content, doesn't run similar risks in terms of overcoding or blanking out (undercoding).

I think that Nick is saying that he feels an untenable authority in writing that is organized in terms of subject matter, and that for his purposes he

is involved with forms of mimic dissociation that one might experience as Freud's "evenly hovering attention." But my experience of texts that are written without intentions for overriding structure is that they can equally beg the question entirely and end up imposing another form of power imbalance on the reader. So I don't see any essential connection between what kind of writing you are doing—whether dissociative or hierarchically subordinated—and the power imbalance in a communicative act.

GH There isn't a privileged form in a political sense?

BW Right, I reject that. I think what's important is the role one is in and the intentions one is acting out in the largest sense. You need to ask, "What are you doing? Is there a complicity between what you are doing and what the reader wants? And how do you negotiate that in the work?" I mean, what is the agency of the work? That agency may not be univalent; it may not turn out to be what you say it is. Maybe it's what it turns out to be as others perceive it. But that's not to say that because that's the case, you surrender all attempts at agency. It seems to me that one is creating a community of aims. One of the problems of art is that once everyone agrees that these aims are the same, you have boring art. So in an approach to being an artist, you would not want to say that one's aims are ever going to even out in terms of the audience's expectations.

In that sense the role Nick is interested in could be seen in an analogy to the therapy situation, where the patient and the analyst both agree that they desire a good outcome. Because they agree that they are proceeding along the same lines, they can allow this "evenly hovering attention" to be revealing, whereas if you were standing in a bank line in a state of "evenly hovering attention" and you suddenly started talking in that manner to someone, you would have just violated a social constraint. It seems to me that the same form can be both transgressive and normative, and that Nick, while using language that in some contexts could be seen as transgressive, is opting for a more reciprocal role. He is interested in the same techniques the surrealists used but without the distinction between conscious and unconscious representation. It's a kind of psychoanalytic processing that takes into account the poetics that have developed since surrealism and possibly in reaction to it.

GH The surrealists, Lacan, Jameson, Derrida all posit some kind of unconscious—the structural unconscious, the political unconscious, etc. What role does the unconscious play or what form does it take as you see it?

BW I don't think the use of an analogy between language and the unconscious is adequate as a literary psychology at all. Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious*, is grasping at straws when he tries to make an

ideological, psychological unity out of some such notion as the ideologue. That seems an error of reading the wrong linguistics, of accepting the linguistics that come through Lacan and Althusser. The linguistic analogy for the unconscious is not adequate to psychological processes that actually occur. But the whole question of what *would* be adequate is wide open at this point. Recently I've been reading the Russian psycholinguist, L.S. Vygotsky, who's early but has things to say about inner speech and socialization that are quite relevant to literary forms, and also Pierre Bourdieu, for his attempt to argue out of the structuralist equivalence of significant terms in a culture and by extension in the psyche. He has come up with notions of process that are both social and interior, really dispensing with the unconscious altogether.

GH Althusser, in his discussion of ideology, wants to bring in something like the unconscious. What would your specific disagreement with him be?

BW I've been interested in Pierre Bourdieu's account of the way social forms are interpreted by subjects in society. It's not that ideology's structured like a language. But there are relations between significant terms in a society, what he calls generative schema, that form an abstract disposition that prefigures interaction. Any response to a social given is met by a capacity to interpret and renegotiate the self in terms of such learned structures. This is what Bourdieu calls the *habitus*, a kind of composite of these generative schema. But this is quite different from the notion of a social unconscious—it seems more useful.

Bourdieu writes about the way the sense of self is bound up with the notion of honor in a society. While honor has something to do with age roles and being accepted into a group as you advance in age, at certain points challenges occur in specific forms. At the moment of recognition of the challenge, you engage in some strategy of response. No matter what happens—if you fail or advance, or if you avoid it altogether—you admit the reality of the challenge, and experience will be structured in those terms. Perhaps the duel of honor has atrophied in our society into playground trashing and its sense of self, but I can imagine a kind of extended analogy to the challenge in which incommensurate information in social space might be taken as a kind of abstract challenge. That is, the reified commodity might be taken as a kind of insult, a displacement. You don't own this, so there's something deficient with you. If you buy it, you've met the challenge; if you reject it, you've decided it's an invalid challenge—you can always choose not to respond.

So Matthew's TV says, "Come to the Top of the Hill, Daly City," and you say, "I'm not challenged by that." But a sixteen-year-old who hasn't figured out his economic viability and feels he has to spend something in order to be with it might take up that challenge, buy the stereo that he may

or may not need, and advance up the ladder of property. It seems to me that such an interactive way of looking at the logic of commodities is better than a language-based one, where the commodity is like a word in a reified language.

GH What is your response to Jameson's postmodernism essay, particularly his section on Bob Perelman?

BW When he says that Bob, when he's writing in a form that's dissociated, is imitating the schizophrenic, that's just wrong. He's writing that way because he's interested in a text with certain properties. He may think it's funny, a goof; it has nothing to do with schizophrenia. But Jameson does say something about the desire for political transformation having to do with dissociation that I think is true—Bob's source for his poem "China" being a Chinese phonetics primer and his use of it as an "original" text being a kind of petit-bourgeois inversion on the order of, "It would be nice to have a social transformation, but since there is none I can only make a joke of myself." In that sense the poem *is* acting out a kind of deflected desire for being part of a social process. This is more accurate than saying that the poem is mimicking the schizophrenic condition.

GH The argument that Jameson doesn't bring up there but that seems to be closely behind it, especially knowing his background in Lucács, is the notion that capitalism is a dissociative force, and that reification, commodification sunder our ties with one another and our connections to the things we make—and there's been the claim that art that isn't realistic is only furthering, is playing into the hands of the status quo, etc. Those people would certainly say that the disjunction in *Progress* would be an example of that.

BW That it excludes, that it constitutes an elite.

GH Yes, as well as Jameson's talk about the need for maps. I guess some people want literature as guidance. And I was wondering how you would see *Progress* as a form of guidance, or if that notion applies.

BW Well, everything has two sides. Abstraction in '40s and '50s painting occurred out of a context that was socially aware and was trying to make a value for a heroic kind of work that would transcend commodity society. It turned out that the paintings were then sold for millions of dollars and became the basis of whole institutions that perpetuate the commodity society. You could also argue that because those paintings did structure those institutions, those institutions are going to be more democratic than they would have been if they had been built on, say, representational paintings. Any social transformation is going to have two sides to it in that way.

I don't think there's any essential validity or invalidity to a form—what's important are its intentions and its particular negotiation with its time and place. In that sense, *Progress* doesn't have an essence, so it can't be said to be reifying—it isn't. I think it would be very difficult to approximate it, to pin it down and build a reified structure on it. But in terms of the formal properties of the text, what I really see as interesting is the way the work functions critically by means of an identification with language that is given a specific value in the work. It says things, particularly about the Vietnam War, that, while occurring as a negotiation of oneself in language, define the act of writing in a specific time and place.

So it's literature, to be read and reflected on. It's also an acting out of certain things, particularly a great deal of social negativity at the beginning of the poem, transgression as much as I could write it. Which isn't to say that I think transgression can be a final value—even that's been shown not to be true.

GH On page 6 of *Progress* you write: "Suppose I cancel this, and / What is left are my mistakes. . . ." How would you recognize mistakes? What's a mistake and what isn't for you?

BW Well, canceling that would be the act of the poem. And that is an aggressive act:

Aggressive neutrality.

Haig,

On the disposition of needs.

Suppose I cancel this, and

What is left are my mistakes. . . .

I had just brought up Alexander Haig and his aggressive neutrality, which is instrumental in *my* aggressive neutrality. Haig's aggressive neutrality is a power imbalance that says, "These are the facts, and all of you are the mistakes." The whole population is leftovers, subject to whatever is instrumental for Haig. My response to this is, "Suppose I cancel *this*, and what is left are *my* mistakes." I'm taking on the social unconscious—using the term provisionally—as the remorse for my having initiated such an act of aggressive neutrality. Whereas when Haig initiates an act of instrumental language, it's not to account for what he hasn't figured out yet about how to distribute America's surplus grain to the underfed in South America. The mistakes are going to take care of themselves. Obviously there's a scale difference between Haig's and my mistakes, but this is a ritual of purification in relation to the challenge of Haig.

GH So that line follows your reference to Haig needs to be there, isn't just randomly inserted? I mean, this isn't "first thought, best thought" is it?

BW No, not at all. It's a deliberate negotiation to come to the thought to put down on paper; it's not improvisatory.

GH Do you use any particular procedures in *Progress*? Steve Benson, Kit Robinson, Ron Silliman, for instance, use various predetermined plans for constructing a work. Did that enter into the writing of *Progress*?

BW It did, but that's pretty evident in terms of the stanza form. The poem was written sequentially, but it was rewritten quite a bit. It was negotiated at the point I was at in the poem at all points. Then things come into the poem from any number of sources. The motivation could be spontaneous or deliberate, but I think it's clear what the form is just by looking at it on the page. There is also a kind of substructure in terms of numbers, counting. There are two hundred pages in the original typescript, multiples of five and six and three in terms of stanzas and lines, and there are certain recurrences of thematic material—names of countries, political figures, numbers of numbers—that I would bring into the poem at specific intervals. Almost every ten pages you find the name of a political figure, and on every page you find two occurrences of the word *I*. The word is being used as a word.

GH Like "I walks," with a first-person subject and third-person verb?

BW The *I* becomes an "it." Or even "Walk I," someone's out walking the *I*.

GH That brings up questions about the subject and so on, psychologically speaking, or the post-structuralist question of the formation of the subject and the multiplicity of selves tied up in what we call the subject. Is that something that interests you?

BW It's inevitably the case that there is no unitary subject, and of course the subject changes in time. The act of writing changes the subject. But the specific reason for writing the word *I* as dissociated from me—it's not me—is that it allows one to investigate areas of language that you wouldn't be able to without it. It's not an indication of what Jameson would call dissociation, or of the self as fragmented—it's a constructive principle intended to engage the world on certain terms. In order to do that we need to use the word *I* provisionally. Anyone who has worked in a large institution constantly uses the word *I* as a word, saying things like, "I don't think I can give you that price," when what you mean is that *the company* can't give them that price. This use of the word *I* is ubiquitous, and anyone who takes language seriously doesn't have to posit a dissociation or a fragmentation of the subject to use it. I would reject seeing the subject at a default in relation to this use of the word *I*. What I'm trying to do is engage the possibilities of it constructively in this poem.

GH To get back to my earlier question about your generational procedures, some of the stanzas in *Progress* look as though they could be completely aleatory, yet in your discussion of the Haig stanza you make it clear that the material before and after that line plays a very specific role there. Whereas some other poets are much more willing to let things occur in conjunctions that to them don't really matter.

BW If you look at Jackson Mac Low, who is the most aleatorical writer I can think of, it turns out that his use of aleatory is involved in his reading of neo-Aristotelian philosophy from the 1940s, his rejection of the unconscious, his interest in Buddhism. So there's no such thing as pure chance. Chance is interested. That having been said, in fact there are some aspects of *Progress* that are pretty gratuitous, but they are placed in such a way that their aleatorical value is being argued for whatever it might convey. What I really want to know is, What is randomness telling us when we experience it? For one thing, randomness seems to be very unlikely—I don't experience it very often. In fact I experience too much closure and order; everything is exactly where it should be. So when the random event happens one tends to treasure it and to use it in some way. There are a number of random elements in this poem, but they are immediately a part of the argument.

GH So then once you see the result, you aren't going to revise it, because you like it. Even though getting to it was random, the result is something that works for you.

BW Say the connection between two things is really gratuitous: what interests me is what the combination might yield in terms of the ongoing argument. It's similar to saying that the twelve-tone system is expressive as opposed to purely formal. It has expressive possibilities. Aleatory has argumentative possibilities.

GH Would you explain what's going on in this passage?

I reject a symbol for pig-iron
Production along the Volga
Visited by Lumumba on tour
In a gondola of coal,
fused. . . .

In the heart of a blast furnace
As a word,
meanwhile voices
Urge syntagma of sightseers
Into barges for the trip down. . . .

Is that a comment on Socialist Realism? "I reject a symbol for pig-iron?"
BW It's more complicated than that because it's acting out the *I*. "I reject a symbol for pig-iron / Production." Kit Robinson writes, "I demolished 530 Bush" [laughs]. Think of how many buildings are left, and at the same time think of the violence of that act. "I reject a *symbol* for pig-iron / Production"—that would be this little thing on a map. Here's the Volga and we see this miniature steel mill, and at that place 10,000 workers show up in overalls every morning at the factory gate, go in, and make pig iron. That would be representation in the static sense, right? I reject representation in that form. Rather, the poem is being fused in the heart of a blast furnace, as it were. That's where *pig iron* comes from, having been fused in a blast furnace rather than having been imposed on pig-iron production by a map. So there are two forms of representation: one categorized from above and one coming out of the experience of producing pig iron. And out of that there are a series of puns, actually, on what meaning is. Here you have the colonized revolutionary on tour seeing the accomplishments of the socialist state, a representative of the third world visiting a representation of the second world. And I'm rejecting these for the formation at the heart of the blast furnace. "Meanwhile voices / Urge syntagma of sightseers / into barges for the trip down": tourists, consumers of false representations, are being floated down river toward their sort of cloacal destination. At the same time a syntagmatic organization *is* occurring by virtue of such automatized spectacles that float down stream. This is a kind of comment on the form of the poem, on the relation of the poem to language. Then I "jump from a 13-story hotel / And assume a net" to counter this syntax. In other words, I'm accepting not representation but a fusing of representation and experience, and the poem is a way that that occurs.

GH Is there anything else you would like to say about the book?

BW That it does argue and is not a static work. That is, it develops, and about four-fifths of the way through the poem I think a crisis is reached and some resolution occurs. And that shape was not anticipated at all.

GH How would you distinguish your own practice from Clark Coolidge's or someone else's?

BW In Coolidge there is an extension in time, a responsiveness in writing not exactly like "first thought, best thought" but certainly an improvisatory responsiveness he's arguing. Then he gets interested in what he calls the "thin spots," where the psyche is washed out, and he wants to keep writing through these to show how the place where you don't think you have anything else to say can produce more psychic energy. Coolidge is interested in an endlessly generative bout of the art impulse. A whole thesis exists on the way art appears in Coolidge's work, how he works off the

notion of art and uses it to recharge the psyche. Finally it comes down to the social role Coolidge wants to play, which is that of the continually productive and deliberately isolated writer whose concern is first of all with the material at hand.

I end up stressing the social role of the artist because I think questions of writing as method lead there. In terms of language, I've placed myself within social processes that are more conflicted than the kinds of unmediated access to language Coolidge pursues. The immediacy I'm interested in is not identified so clearly with the real time of writing. I want to use language that's already in circulation to see if it can be reinvented, and to make constructive use of the space between the work and other's responses to it. The medium is no longer simply in the writer or on the page, but in a kind of intersubjective resonance that is as much a part of the act as the act of writing itself.

ON WHETHER OR NOT TO BELIEVE IN YOUR MIND **BY NORMAN FISCHER (The Figures, 1987)**

Digging through old journals I spotted this, jotted down in Charles Olson's class by Clark Coolidge:

Peter Auxier: language is something you have to get into rather than something that's in you, to be got out

Now Norman Fischer:

Experience may not be *wholly* linguistic
Though I suspect it is.

Both of which support the conviction that language and its parallel domain Imagination, are *out there* places, not sealed mental locations to pry open privately via drugs or any other technique. The poem accordingly is also not private affair dredged from *inside*, but gets composed of public, and widely available, linguistic elements.

The fact is, solitary mental phenomena seem pretty lonely & impoverished when viewed against our common & inhabited world.