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THE EFFECT ON THE AUDIENCE WAS NOT MEANT TO BE SATISFYING **TOM KONYVES**

When I left Montreal for New York in 1975, I was leaving behind more than a broken marriage and a mind-numbing dead-end job with a trash-tabloid publishing syndicate. I had also spent six years wrestling with the possibility that the reason I persisted in writing poems had little to do with the cynicism of a disillusioned graduate of Concordia’s English Lit program.

Far from the reach of academia, in the dark, smoke-filled “open reading” rooms on Bleecker St., I began to discover that the small still voice within was indeed the authentic voice of a poet, whose works did not need the colour and sound of the “tradition” to be valid. Living in New York, my poems were turning from lyrical meditations to surreal snapshots or “micro-dramas”. These new poems were “experimental”, but they were also expressing the freedom I was feeling, so I mixed brief streams of consciousness with deliberate wordplay, juxtaposed abstractions to images of the fleeting present, combined journalese and fantasy, deconstructed the flatness of everyday speech to render it ironic if not outright meaningless, all ultimately the application of a Dadaist principle — the union of opposites. Months later, I returned to Montreal and, having walked and talked with Allen Ginsberg, with half a book of fresh poems under my arm, I knew I had more than enough enthusiasm to storm my hometown.

Back in Montreal, I made the rounds of readings and, almost immediately, met Bob Galvin, a displaced New Yorker, who introduced me to another American, the young poet Ken Norris. We became friends, and our circle quickly grew to include the seven poets who eventually got tagged The Vehicule Poets – by Wynne Francis, an English prof at Concordia. At first, the group’s get-togethers were spent in talking about poetry and socializing. As we exulted in our camaraderie, I began to believe that the poems we wanted to read and hear, the poems we were all yearning for, had never been written; that all the master poets put together could not create the poems we needed, the poems we so yearned for – so we had to write them.

We agreed on some basic principles: that poetry should reflect the new (contemporary) in content and form; that experimentation should be encouraged; that conservatism and traditionalism should be dismissed and openly opposed; and that poetry should reach its audience in a more immediate way.

We watched our poems appear in public almost immediately after we wrote them – our first poetry magazine was the mimeographed *Mouse Eggs*. Poetry was alive, and Montreal was the right place to be a poet. I was feeling the freedom poetry is after. Experimenting with form could never have become so attractive in isolation; I was having serious fun! There were so many ways to express a poem that I began running, running until I ran off the page into visual performance, eventually video. And I kept asking, what has not yet been done?

The group was for the opposite of isolation; therefore it was inevitable that we would write collaborative poetry. As a matter of fact, the first night we really came together was when we followed a few beers with a blank sheet of paper which we passed around for a couple of lines.

What made the Vehicule Poets unique was this collaboration. Our *Collaborations* created *Partnerships*, at times a rare *Union*; there was a sense of *Solidarity*, we exulted in the *Comaraderie*, at the gallery meetings we displayed *Comradeship*, in our private lives we were *Close*, we were *Friends*.

The support of the group certainly facilitated my efforts in collaborative work. The one (and only) performance of *Drummer Boy Raga: Red Light, Green Light* was satisfying partly because I initiated it, witnessed its evolution, and saw it through to its performance; but sharing a collaborative spirit was such a unique feeling that I continued working with other poets, artists, and musicians for many more years. My performance oriented poems culminated in working in video, creating "videopoems" – the word I used in 1978 – again with the support and participation of the others.

When I discovered Dada, my biggest surprise was that I hadn't known of it earlier. It fit well with my cynical, deconstructive side, with the word permutations I had learned from Cabalist texts, with the performance art I was witnessing at The Vehicule Art Gallery, and with my obsessive love of word-play (my magazine *Hh* was named for "Hobbyhorse", the French definition of "Dada"). Dada had played itself out primarily in French; I believed there was still unexplored territory in English.

Once we accepted the fact that we were an identifiable group, we began to explore ways we could express ourselves: publishing magazines and books, broadsides and chapbooks on a frequent basis, and of course, collaborating/performing together. But all these activities resulted from a common meeting space, the Vehicule Art Gallery.

As members of the Vehicule Art Gallery, we vacillated between obsessive involvement in the gallery's affairs and utter boredom with it. Our reading series was a common responsibility, but the highly politicized environment at the gallery resulted only in strengthening the bond between us, the poets of Vehicule. As we became familiar with the operations of the gallery, we learned the advantages and disadvantages of organization. We also witnessed the use and abuse of administrative power and artist politics.

On the positive side, I can't overemphasize the significance of arriving at the space to find a thought-provoking, if not shocking, exhibition of young experimental visual artists; as well as meeting and getting to know painters, sculptors, musicians, performance artists, video artists, dancers from all over the world. The atmosphere was almost always intense, electric. It was inevitable that we would examine our own expression, poetry, in the light of what we were seeing around us. Unlike university faculty lounges, libraries and bookstores, the gallery made poetry come alive; it was more than just a venue for readings. (Coffee houses were different, but ultimately the poets there did not control the space. At Vehicule, we did.)

A printing press donated by the artist Tom Dean became Vehicule Press, through which we began to publish our books. The press, the performance/reading space, the video recording equipment,

the gallery network, the resident and visiting artists, the communication tools (access to telephone, mass mailings, stationary), not only enabled us to participate in an active art scene, promote each other's work, and keep up to date on contemporary art issues, but also to take poetry wherever we desired. We also became aware of the power of the group – allowing us to reach farther, inside and out.

In 1977, poetry was still writing and reading. While some performance artists were experimenting with poetry at alternative galleries and performance spaces, the mainstream poetry scene was – not unexpectedly – print-oriented. The Canada Council, wielding significant power through its grants to poets, defined poetry primarily by the publication of poetry in book form— 48 pages minimum.

While organizing a reading series at Vehicule, I had specific tasks: invite the poets, print posters, write press releases, set up chairs, introduce the reader, make coffee for the intermission, sell books, fill out forms for the poet to get paid and lock the doors after everyone left. Sometimes we set up the video camera and documented the reading. My interest in video began when I realized that once framed, the poet did not move out of the frame, and an audio recording could have served equally well.

The medium of video was not being challenged or explored by poetry. Poems were *for the page* and *for the ear*. There were poems *for the eye* – experiments in concrete poetry, conceived with the page in mind. Letters, words or phrases were blown up, cut up, strewn across the page, upside down, backwards, sideways, out of order, stenciled, outlined; typefaces were mixed, picture and text were juxtaposed; finally, collages appeared as poems. Minimalist art thus explored poetry and the experience of a poem. The experimental artists at the time were fiercely interested in the non-narrative, producing mostly conceptual works, culminating in not one but two new forms— *performance art* and *installations*. The video artists were creating conceptual works (video as fishbowl), bizarre exhibitionist fictions (performances created uniquely for the eye of the camera), or a combination of the two (video monitor as participant).

I saw two distinct directions for poetry: towards the page and away from the page. Choosing the latter meant severing ties with the majority of poets, which ultimately meant being marginalized or simply ignored. The fact was that the mood was favouring the new (or so it appeared within the friendly confines of the gallery) and the medium of video was accessible at the gallery. I approached video with concerns about the poet as performer as well as a trial ground for a novel treatment of text. I immediately liked the fact that, unlike the poem on the page, I was able to unravel the poem at my own speed. What finally differentiated my videopoems from poetry and video art was this ability to simultaneously present a work and also question the role of the poet.