

An edited version of this essay can be found in
“Language Acts: Anglo-Québec Poetry, 1976 to the 21st Century”, edited By Jason
Camlot and Todd Swift, Vehicule Press, 2007, p.158-160

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<http://www.vehiculepress.com/titles/419.html>

SOMETHING’S GOT TO BE SAID FOR THE OTHER SIDE

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The avant-garde did not yet exist. In the late sixties, the milieu was shared by two universities and a couple of bookstores: SGWU (Concordia) was spending on poetry readings by “name” poets while neighbouring McGill was fast becoming a steady publisher of young poets, through its *Literary Supplement* to the Daily. Two bookstores also sponsored readings and, located as they were on the perimeter of the universities, managed to mirror their respective styles: book launches were usually hosted by The Double Hook (its audience was ultra-wasp Westmount mixed with Sir George hippies accompanying their profs), while The Word was an informal, intimate reading room (stacked from floor to ceiling with books, the small storefront room was quickly filled to capacity with McGill students). Of the cafes, the Kharma coffee-house put on some evenings of readings, and it was here that I encountered the living breathing poet in my Lit-Crit professor, Richard Sommer; here, under a spotlight directed at a simple red brick wall, less than a block away from the bureaucratic doublespeak of our institution, in an atmosphere of relative freedom and equality, he became a friend (and, for a short time, a genuine practitioner of experimental writing, even at the potential expense of being alienated from the Concordia English Department elite). His wife, Vicky Tansey, was a dancer, and he sometimes read his poems accompanied by Vicky, dancing.

The Department-sponsored readings at the university Hall could hold no real meaning for me, stamped as they were with institutional legitimacy, their all-too-civil decorum wafted in from the classrooms above. The English Department’s agenda was clear: maintain a “conservative” policy of supporting and protecting “mainstream poetry” while ignoring the rude postmodernists. No wonder some well-heeled profs later became the object of ridicule and a symbol of opposition to many of us.

In the early seventies, the breakthrough for the experimental, the avant-garde, was realized with the sudden introduction of poetry to two of the new artist-run galleries, Powerhouse and Vehicule. Removed from the influence of the universities, Vehicule was also removed from the commercial influence of bookstores (although the gallery was occasionally used for book launches, primarily by small presses). Of our group, I became most intimately involved in the running of the gallery, at one point representing the poets on the board’s executive.

My political involvement at Vehicule Art also strengthened my poetic “principles” (I can’t help but think of Louis Dudek, who asked if we had “any” or did we “just churn it out”) which, in view of the gallery’s orientation to the experimental and the multi-disciplinary, I was in the process of formulating, as to what was or was not *avant-garde* poetry. These principles were based partly on my growing interest in Dada and Surrealism, but even more so on the visual art exhibitions and performance art I was witnessing at the gallery, works which ultimately inspired me to create what I called “videopoems” (1978) and to collaborate with other poets in “performance

poems” like *Drummer Boy Raga*, *Red Light*, *Green Light* (1979). At the same time, most significantly, I learned to use the status of Vehicule as a non-profit organization to produce projects such as *Poesie en Mouvement/Poetry On The Buses* (1979), *Art Montreal*, the TV series (1979-1980), as well as an exhibition of *Concrete Poetry* (1981). The precedent for these “gallery-sponsored” activities was already provided by Endre Farkas and Ken Norris, who had become editors of Vehicule Press while the press was still under the “umbrella” of the gallery, enabling all of us eventually to publish our books, thus creating an alternative publishing power to the established presses. (Ken Norris is the authority here.)

Two significant others.

Opal L. Nations arrived from England and, almost immediately, collaborations and performances were happening. Opal was a prolific writer of dense, convoluted prose with a biting wit, always humorous, always reading for what seemed like hours. He told us of collaborations and “parlour readings” back home, and was always bursting with energy. The collaboration on *Drummer Boy Raga* began when I handed Opal my poem *To Dawn*, which he then cut to pieces (literally), inserting his lines between mine. He then scotchtaped it all together and handed it back to me. It was then passed to Endre, then Stephen, then Ken. By the time we were ready to perform the piece, we added a flute, a conga drum, and a dancer. For some reason we couldn’t perform it at Vehicule, so the one and only performance took place in April 1977, at the Powerhouse Gallery. It was a blast!

Steve McCaffery was part of The Four Horsemen, who performed sound-poetry, touring the parallel-gallery circuit, eventually arriving in Montreal, hosted by Vehicule. I found Steve to be well-versed in the avant-garde, interested in video, and we became friends, staying in touch for many years. We met soon after I had just completed my first videopoem *Sympathies of War*, and I remember how excited we were about the possibilities of poetry on video. In performance with the Four Horsemen, Steve displayed the gestures of a true Dada, playing with absurdity in as authentic a manner as I’ve ever seen.

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For me, what defined the Vehicule Poets as a group (despite Gold’s objections) was not simply *experimentation*, whether in structure or method on the page, in the subject matter of the poems or in their combination with other media. More unusual than these, notwithstanding the *collaborations*, was the freedom expressed in our *joy of poetry* (and more transparent evidence of this cannot be found than on our faces for the cover photo of *The Vehicule Poets*), writing it, talking about it, sharing it, performing it, and when not up to our standards, even dismissing it!

At the time of writing my poem *No Parking* (1977), we had a reading set up in Burlington, Vermont, and I wanted to surprise the others by including them in this poem, which I was about to read for the first time, across the border. The single word allusions to the others (dakini/Lapp, *hostie*/Farkas, *Houdini*/Norris, *inspector*/Opal L. Nations, *window-maker*/Sommer, *pasta-maker*/Gold, *cloud-maker*/Morrissey) demonstrate the freedom of wordplay I particularly enjoyed (I would insert addresses, phone numbers, some found, some known to me, and other specific references into my poems). Similarly, the title of my video-play *Ubu’s Blues*, *The First Voyage of the Vehicle R*, alluded to Vehicule Art. The “vehicle” reference was also intended in other titles: my first book *No Parking*, the videopoems *Yellow Light Blues*, as well as our collaboration *Drummer Boy Raga*, *Red Light*, *Green Light*. In retrospect, it was a celebration of us, the Vehicule

Poets, the Vehicule Gallery, the City, the times.

We ripped poetry out of the poetry books and the poetry readings and the universities and the poetry magazines and hurled them into the streets and the buses and the newspapers and the television sets, we pasted them on the walls of our galleries and the doors of our houses, we transformed our poems into visual experiences and we danced the poems and chanted them, we published them within days of writing them, we performed them with musicians, we read our poems together out loud, we cried them and sang them, we delivered them deadpan to the silence of a crowded room. We were the vehicle of the avant-garde, and the vehicle had arrived.