

BROOKLYN RAIL

Poetic Alliances

New Visions for the Spoken Word by Maxwell Heller

Conversation about New York's poetry scene generally drifts in romantic directions, either to the lost years when poets lived within walking distance of one another, met on street corners, converged for readings in apartments and bars, or to the difficult future, when gentrification and post-modernity decentralize and permanently scatter a movement-less poet community. Perhaps these narratives stem from legitimate concerns.

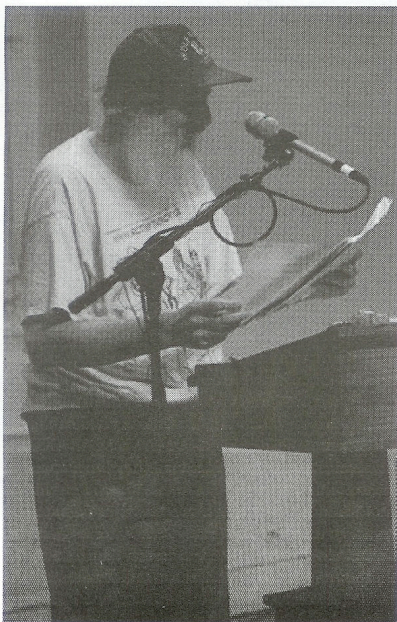
The Lower-East Side, once known as a 'gritty' home for creative culture, having completed its long-anticipated metamorphosis, has been declared 'fashionable' after the New Museum's auspicious opening in December. Chelsea's thriving commercial gallery district feeds on an unprecedented art-trade boom, expanding upward and outward. Neighborhoods continue shifting—and poets struggle to adjust.

Preparing for the coming season, three poetry centers are finding new ways to strengthen their presence despite major external and internal change. The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church, Bowery Arts & Science, Ltd., and Cue Art Foundation greet 2008 with new coordinators Stacy Szymaszek, Marshall Reese and Vincent Katz, who look to foster a poetry community that transcends the shifts in local culture. Expanding their websites, launching publications, drawing support from allies old and new, they outline plans that focus on new possibilities rather than abstract worries.

THE POETRY PROJECT AT ST. MARK'S CHURCH

After more than forty years of writing workshops, lit mags, newsletters, readings and symposia featuring hundreds of poets, legends and amateurs alike, the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church still burns—in Allen Ginsberg's oft-repeated words—"like red hot coal in New York's snow." Stacy Szymaszek, the Project's Artistic director, is looking not only to harness that radiant energy, but also to nurture the elements that made it possible so long ago.

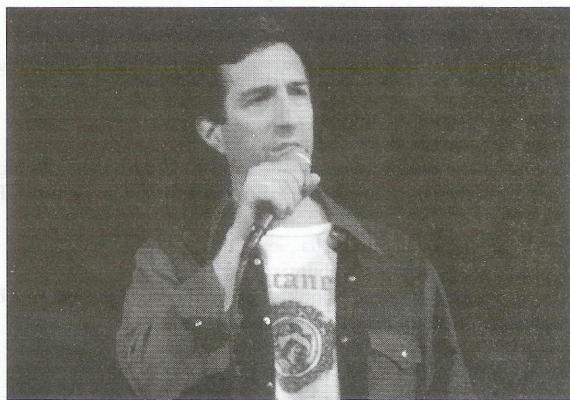
On July 1, 2007, only a few short months after Anselm Berrigan announced plans to step down as Artistic Director, program coordinator Szymaszek found herself slated to fill the shoes of a man celebrated for his contributions to the Project. "There are such resounding warm feelings about the vigor



Sparrow reads at St. Mark's Church. Photo by Jennifer Jeane.

of Anselm's life and work," Szymaszek says, laughing about the early worries that accompanied her high expectations, "I just focused on continuing that, building on what he's done." And she has succeeded—the programs Berrigan once led continue to strengthen with Szymaszek's guidance and, while crowds overflow their seats to line the Church's walls, new programs are already underway.

"I love having a hand in breathing life into the Poetry Project," Szymaszek says, "I love the galvanic effect of the work." The word "galvanic" perfectly encapsulates her vision for the upcoming



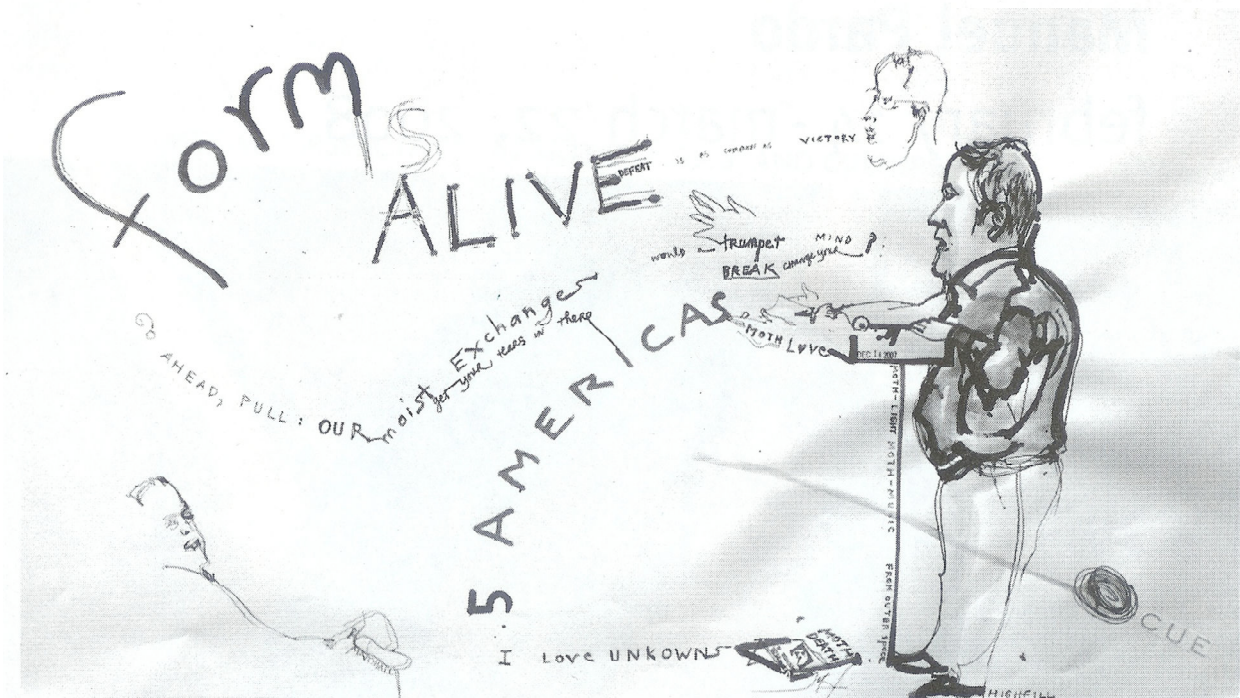
Vincent Katz performing "Judge" with the Lindsey Horner Group, Bowery Poetry Club, April 28, 2007

season. As a curator, Szymaszek searches for tensions in contemporary poetics and brings them to the fore, pulling differing readers into close proximity so that they charge one another's work. This signals something more than a sensationalistic fascination with opposition, it reveals her drive to discover common goals beneath formalistic differences between contemporary poets. "I always find 'the disparate bill' more interesting, because it urges us to find the crossover between very different poets," explains Szymaszek. "What I've learned is that, essentially, poets who come to the Project are engaged in the practice of restoring meaning to language, a radical idea that Oppen and so many other poets put forth to define the work of the poet." Perhaps she refined this approach during her extensive tenure at Woodland Pattern Press (Wisconsin), the Midwest poetry hub that first aligned her with New York's poets; but it also stems from her long experience with the Project, which "interests itself in *everything*."

When considering change in the Bowery, Szymaszek doesn't wax nostalgic, nor does she downplay the threats to Manhattan's artistic communities. She focuses instead on innovations that strengthen the project's presence, expanding its website to include audio archives of readings and other material. She comments that perpetual adaptation is essential to any artistic venture, especially when its network of artists shifts constantly. "Of course, as the city changes, you see changes in the social life surrounding poetry," Szymaszek says. "You see that this neighborhood is no longer a viable place for artists to live, that there's no longer a poet on every corner—the community has been decentralized, and so it's more rare to see organic growth of relationships. But we try to remain unaffected." Szymaszek's long interaction with New York poets convinces her that local challenges will do little to undermine their connection. Having been immersed in two very different artistic atmospheres—the purportedly "inclusive" Midwest and purportedly "elitist" Manhattan—she recognizes the strengths of the Project's network. "There's a tendency to cast aspersions at New York poets, but there's true generosity here. As Ginsberg said, the real work gets done after the readings, and so even today we head out together after events." She pauses for a minute. "We're still the red hot coal."

THE CUE ART FOUNDATION: WORDS + MUSIC

Ink drawings by ambidextrous Jeff Schlanger provide an exuberant record of Cue Art Foundation's numerous readings and performances, some of them stretching to panoramic widths. They depict poets and performers gesturing behind microphones and trembling instruments, casting phrases and strands of sound across the page. These drawings epitomize Cue's driving ambition: to create a nexus where experimental music, visual art and poetry draw strength from one another in Chelsea.



Climb is the right side detail of Cue Climb, Jane Ira Bloom and Mark Dresser live at CUE on 21 December 2007, original color art 30 x 45"; Form Alive, Mitch Highfill reading at CUE on December 21, 2007, Original color art 26 x 40". Both photos by Jeff Schlanger, musicWitness(r)



"Historically, there has always been a very active intermingling of poets and visual artists, and we want to continue that by bringing poets and musicians together here," says Marshall Reese, the new curator for Cue's "Words + Music" program. "Words + Music" took shape in 2004, when William Corbett organized a series that brought readers and musicians to Cue's gallery, and in 2005 the program became an official part of the foundation's mission. This season, Reese continues Corbett's work with the burgeoning program, drawing on his long-held fascination with

the interactions between music and language. As executive director Jeremy Adams comments, the Foundation supports every possible 'crosspollination' between aesthetic disciplines, and while this can occur spontaneously—visual artists sometimes request that certain poets read with their work as a backdrop—Cue needs a curator to provide vision and direction for the program. Reese's aesthetic interests recommend him for this role, and his descriptions of the venue betray his enthusiasm. "The gallery context is so important," he says. "You can become absorbed by painting or sculpture during readings or performances—it provides something that bars and other venues don't."

Beyond its pursuit of artistic crosspollination, Cue commits itself to supporting emerging or underexposed artists and poets, despite its position at the epicenter of Chelsea's commercial gallery district. According to Reese and Adams, Cue consciously decided to place itself in what they call "the belly of the beast," acting as infiltrators in strange territory. "Yes, we wanted to access the ready-made audience that Chelsea provides, but we also wanted an opportunity to stir things up," Adams explains. Rather than alienating or quixotically combating its neighbors, however, Cue considers itself a friendly and necessary foil for the commercially oriented ventures nearby, importing the diversity that might otherwise go unexplored. In seasons to come, Reese hopes to continue this effort in "Words + Music" events, foregrounding alternatives to what many consider a 'lily-white' art community by featuring poets and musicians whose innovations contribute significantly to their fields, but who remain outside the public eye. With this in mind, he comments that contemplation of translation will be a central thread in his work here. "At this time, and especially within this diverse society, translated work needs to be spotlighted."

BOWERY ARTS & SCIENCES, LTD.

With a pre-history inextricably linked to St. Mark's and the old Nuyorican Café, the Bowery Poetry Club has carved a niche in Manhattan's poetry scene despite its relative youth. Executive director and founder Bob Holman, a "postmodern promoter of poetry," and Elizabeth Murray created the Club five years ago not only as a performance venue but as a community resource, successfully launching Urban Word, Study Abroad at the Bowery, and other outreach programs that urge youth from across the nation to engage with contemporary poetics. Today, the Club continues to increase its offerings, looking forward to the launch of a new zine and perhaps an alliance with the New Museum.

But the non-profit organization is also preparing for significant transformations. Last year, Holman made arrangements to share his directorial responsibilities, reaching into BPC's network to assemble a Board of Directors comprising poets and visual artists like Anne Waldman, Jim Dine, and Vincent Katz, Chair. "Bob wanted the club to continue—it *needed* to continue—but the make-up of the board was very important," says Katz, "It had to represent both artists and poets, and it had to be willing to represent experimental work." Katz first came to BPC during a book launch in 2003 and immediately found himself drawn to its 'mysterious, dark interior,' and also to its inclusiveness, constant flux, and spontaneity. "I heard about the Bowery Poetry Club and the Nuyorican before I saw either—but the Bowery Poetry Club in particular had an aura of rock-and-roll to it," Katz laughs, "There's an openness to the programming here...When you go to see something, you find yourself learning about something else."

The club will also weather change in its Bower-and-Houston neighborhood, the New Museum's arrival being the most recent, and the most meaningful for Katz. As editor of an arts and poetry journal (*Vanitas*), he echoes Cue's emphasis of artistic crosspollination, and so welcomes New Museum as a natural ally. "We've connected with Lisa Phillips, and she maintains a real interest in poetry," he says, "We're looking forward to the possibility of joint ventures with the New Museum—poets giving lectures or guiding exhibition tours at the museum; artists standing behind the microphone at the club." As he charts a new course, Katz seems ready to adapt so long as his central vision for BPC remains intact—the venue will steadfastly pursue a forward-looking culture that is neither commercially or academically oriented, a space that offers fresh possibilities for poetry. "If the Bowery gets slick," he says, "we'll adjust." ■

For more information about these organization, or for lists of upcoming events and performances, please visit these websites: The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church, [HYPERLINK "http://www.poetryproject.com"](http://www.poetryproject.com) www.poetryproject.com; The Cue Art Foundation, www.cueartfoundation.org; Bowery Arts & Sciences, Ltd., [HYPERLINK "http://www.bowerypoetry.com"](http://www.bowerypoetry.com) www.bowerypoetry.com.