

tion, Pomerand's book might seem to offer little beyond historical value. Yet *Saint Ghetto* is more than a mere museum piece. Pomerand's pseudo-Kabbalistic formulations recall the Jewish conception of primordial language, in which communication fails not because of language itself but because of the fallible mortals who cannot grasp its vastness. For Pomerand (as for the Kabbalists) we can only seize fragments, which we puzzle out as we can. All the while the signified itself persists: as hidden, inexhaustible, and excessive as the exiled remnants of the mystics' primordial language.

Without question *Saint Ghetto of the Loans* is obsessed with the perils of communication, but despite its overwhelming pessimism it holds to sparks of faith. The Lettrists were committed to the idea that innovations in language could change material reality, and Pomerand's desire for "geometric priestliness" is a desire for tomb-writing that somehow defies death. The real accomplishment of *Saint Ghetto*, then, is less as an argument about the limits of the human condition than it is a tribute to the infinite glory of signs.

Spencer Dew

## §

Daniel Kane, ed., *Don't Ever Get Famous: New York Writing after the New York School*. Champaign: Dalkey Archive, 2006. 399pp. \$34.95

Extending the kind of literary-historical inquiry he pursued in *All Poets Welcome*, Daniel Kane has edited a substantial collection of essays on New York writing (mostly experimental poetry) between the apex of the New York School circa 1960 and the ascendance of Language poetry in the 1980s. Kane's volume takes a self-consciously "recuperative and critical approach to the poetry of New York writers of the 60s and 70s," aiming to foreground what he calls the "significant and, until now, relatively ignored texts" produced in this "barely-analyzed period." The first nine essays deal mostly with collectives—second-generation New York School, Umbra, Deep Image, and writers associated with conceptual art—while the remaining six serve as critical introductions to lesser-known poets who maintained some relationship to the New York scene, such as Lee Harwood, Joseph Ceravolo, Lewis Warsh, Charles North, and John Wieners.

The "idea of Downtown"—the literary and social life defined by vanguardist practice and political counterculture centered in institutions like the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church—is the primary organizational category for this collection. The book focuses almost entirely on Lower East Side-based writers for whom disaffiliation with the "mainstream" was important. Since many of the essays are supported by assiduous archival work, *Don't*

*Ever Get Famous* offers a ground-level view of the poetry produced during this “neglected interval,” including the little magazines, literary schools, communities, and performance venues from which it emerged.

Though in some cases vastly different from one another, all of the essays in *Don't Ever Get Famous* are recovery projects of some kind. The best examine critically neglected work that has been tremendously influential for a range of writers, including the Language poets and many younger poets working today. The twinned themes of influence and reception emerge in a number of the chapters: Andrew Epstein considers how Amiri Baraka, serving as a “bridge between different factions” in the writing world, “came to embody an exciting experiment in collaboration, friendship, and intertextuality across traditional boundaries of race”; Jed Rasula reconstructs the genealogy of Deep Image as a group moniker and as a literary-conceptual term; Daniel Kane explores how second-generation New York School poets “exhibited sociability and group affiliation” within their poems in a way that distinguished them from their immediate predecessors; and Bob Perelman examines “poetic fucking across history” to theorize literary influence and inheritance as different but related phenomena. Two other chapters—Linda Russo on Bernadette Mayer and Hannah Weiner, and Lytle Shaw on Mayer and Clark Coolidge—consider other genres, media, and aesthetic practices, providing cogent discussions of the conversation between poetry and art during the period. These six are the strongest essays in the collection. Each offers a unique interpretive scheme, which not only puts individual literary works in appropriate historical context but also establishes a way to think about this work beyond the time and place of its making.

Jed Rasula’s conceptually hefty essay on Deep Image tracks the development of this phenomenon as an outgrowth of Surrealism that spans several countries, generations, and traditions. The piece is putatively about a small cluster of poets—David Antin, Jerome Rothenberg, and Robert Kelly in New York; and Robert Bly and James Wright in the Midwest. After pointing to a few primary documents—including Bly’s magazine *The Fifties*, Robert Kelly’s magazine *Trobar*, and Stephen Stepanchev’s 1965 book *American Poetry Since 1945*—Rasula moves on to discuss the meaning of the term “Deep Image.” (Bly, having grown averse to the term not long after its inception, came up with an alternative in “Leaping Poetry.”) Rasula suggests that if the deep image is “not simply the 1912 Imagist image with depth as added value,” then perhaps it is more cinematic than poetic, a formal device akin to the “montage of attractions” or the “emotional shocks” in the films and film theory of Eisenstein. Or maybe the deep image is a “sound provoked by, or in attunement with, a rhythm,” which uncouples it from the purely pictorial and links it to the “dark sounds” that define Lorca’s *duende*: “As with *duende*, deep image is a way of recognizing that ineffable point at which the work of creation intersects with—is pierced

by—the work of destruction.” Rasula concludes the essay with the question: “Should the deep image be restricted to period connotations, and understood as the selective integration of surrealist-tinged duende into American poetry?” His answer, as his methodology no doubt foreshadows, is that it should not because it cannot, for the deep image, an elusive formal and conceptual category, resists being programatized, thwarts “direct scrutiny,” and crops up, on Rasula’s view, only in “peripheral vision.”

Regardless of what one might think of Deep Image or “Leaping Poetry,” Rasula’s essay provides an original interpretative framework for the movement, which is unfortunately not true of some of the other chapters in the volume. Some essays in *Don’t Ever Get Famous* take as their *only* goal the introduction of “relatively underrepresented writers.” As a result, portions of the book amount to exercises in antiquarianism, in which attention to lesser-known writers is justified by their proximity to well-known writers such as John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara. The unintended implication of these essays is that certain poets matter simply for being part of a scene that once included many now-canonized luminaries. This, of course, is not the best way to convince even a sympathetic reader to take the poetry seriously.

A poem by Lewis Warsh in Gary Lenhart’s essay illustrates this problem:

A girl  
and boy in their  
teens talk to a policeman  
in the lobby  
of the P.A.L.  
building on the corner  
of 10th and Avenue A.  
In the old  
Peace Eye Bookstore,  
on Avenue A,  
facing the park, some  
Polish men sit around  
a table playing cards.  
I decided not to walk  
through the park. On  
9th Street two kids sit  
on the curb watching their  
father change a tire, a rack  
of tires in front of  
a storefront, and a sign in the window  
—black lettering on cardboard—  
“Flats Fixed.”

Warsh’s poem, for Lenhart, is “remarkable as a variant” of O’Hara’s literary aesthetic. I am willing to be convinced that Warsh is fascinating, but Lenhart

does not produce the plush and idiosyncratic reading that would convince me, and this particular poem—a failed derivative of O’Hara’s “I do this I do that poem”—doesn’t do Warsh any favors (nor do any of the poems featured in the essay). Lenhart treats proximity as an obvious and self-sufficient value: Warsh is close to O’Hara, so Warsh must be important. This is both the hypothesis and, regrettably, the conclusion of Lenhart’s essay.

That *Don’t Ever Get Famous* includes several strong essays and several that deploy this simple antiquarianism points to a deeper problem in contemporary poetry scholarship. It seems disciplinary paradigms discourage criticism that treats poetry in combination with other kinds of writing and arts. If *Don’t Ever Get Famous* is purportedly about “New York Writing after the New York School,” why aren’t there any essays on fiction, philosophy, or literary journalism? If the plan is to “trouble rather than codify assumptions about the stylistic, social, and/or cultural consistency of the works often gathered under the ‘New York School’ rubric,” why do nearly all of the essays focus on experimental poetry? The result of ignoring these questions is an uneven book of essays on poetry, rather than a book that follows the examples of Shaw and Russo, who demonstrate and conceptualize the empirical links between poetry and art during the period.

To be fair, Kane is interested in “correcting the historical record” of “a very specific slice of ‘New York writing.’” But it would have resulted in a better, and probably more influential, product if the handful of fine essays in this collection were joined by equally strong work on other kinds of literary experimentalism. If nothing else, this would have helped achieve the volume’s goal of challenging simplistic assumptions about literary taxonomy. In the end, *Don’t Ever Get Famous* should be applauded for assuming the demanding task of historical recuperation; its best essays will no doubt influence the way readers will approach New York writing after the New York school. Still, I await the collection that is undisciplined by the disciplinary conventions that helped to obscure this “specific slice of ‘New York writing’” in the first place.

David J. Alworth

## §

Laird Hunt, *The Exquisite*. Minneapolis: Coffee House, 2006. 254pp. \$14.95

In the acknowledgements for *The Exquisite*, Laird Hunt is frank about his debt to W.G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn*, citing the book as the impetus for his novel about death and bohemian eccentricity in the East Village sometime after 9/11. Hunt imports references from Sebald—in particular, to Rembrandt’s *The Anatomy Lesson* and to Sir Thomas Browne’s *Hydriotaphia*—to fashion