

of taste regarding Ungar's subject, as when one says that Sade is "too boring" or "too repetitive" or "too focused on coprophagy" to be sexy. It is a matter of form. Whenever the incidents in Ungar's fiction begin to resemble masochistic fantasy, as they often do, the descriptions become simultaneously desexualized and obscene. In "Story of a Murder," just moments after abusing the protagonist, the mistress abruptly gives birth: "A filthy bloody gob lay between her feet in a puddle of blood and foul-smelling liquid."

This filthy, foul, birth-giving woman appears in all of Ungar's best works. She has no place in the Deleuze's account of masochism, where the objective is to submit to a cold woman whose body scarcely exists except as a series of fetishes—boots, furs, corsets. If only the women in Ungar's fiction had the decency to be cold, or to conceal their bodies within fetish objects, they would be less horrifying.

When Ungar leaves out this horrifying woman—this "soft" "warm" "haired" body, as it is variously described—or when Ungar's male protagonists neglect the task of humiliating their father's likeness within themselves, the writing falls into that curiously saccharine register praised by Thomas Mann. In the early story "A Man and a Maid," a son obeys his father perfectly; the result is a strained epiphany in which the father feels that "tears washed the hatred from my soul...as if gentle light were shining within me." At such moments, it is as though Ungar's work had not yet found its signature. When he strains toward "souls" and "light," Ungar fails. But in a minor arena of sexual horror, Ungar is unsurpassable.

Diana George

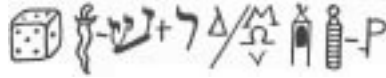
§

Gabriel Pomerand, *Saint Ghetto of the Loans: Grimoire*. Translated by Michael Kasper. Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2006. 118pp. \$14

Gabriel Pomerand's *Saint Ghetto of the Loans* is one of the seminal works of Lettrism, a short-lived art movement born in 1945, when Pomerand met Isidore Isou at a soup kitchen for Jewish orphans. The book, reprinted by Ugly Duckling Presse with Michael Kasper's translation of the French text, is a rambling narrative of bohemian and criminal life in Saint Germain des Prés, the denizens of which include celebrity existentialists and stock characters sprung from bestselling noir novels. Pomerand lived out the same disjunctive existence his text describes, mixing anonymity and fame, squalor and riches. Homeless, he performed his sound poems to ritzy, slumming nightclub audiences under the stage name Saint Gabriel.

Most striking about *Saint Ghetto of the Loans* are the elaborate rebuses that stand opposite Pomerand's prose poems. Filled with occult symbols,

algebraic lines, musical notes, and pieces of Cyrillic and Hebrew script, the rebuses, which Pomerand called metagraphics, are more than mere parlor games. To read this book is to struggle through an elaborate, almost impossible work of decoding. Take this relatively simple example:



In the first half of the line, a single die, *dé*, next to an Indonesian kris dagger, minus the “s” sound of the Hebrew letter ψ plus the “r” sound of the Hebrew γ becomes *decrier*, describe. Such decodings are often complicated by street argot and occult glyphs as well as by alternate sign systems such as musical and mathematical notation.

Without the accompanying text, many of Pomerand’s rebuses would be unreadable. On one page, a wrist with five hands writhes in some kind of sign language. On another, a haloed louse, set up in a miniature manger, is the messiah of modern times. Christian symbols appear in upheaval, with soiled miters, scattered stoles, and crosses rising like cacti from the ground. Death becomes a more explicit focus as the story progresses, and the rebuses’ contrast switches from black on white to white on an all-devouring black. On the book’s final page, a pictographic penis rises like some kind of parodic altar from a landscape cluttered with tombstones. In Pomerand’s Saint Germain human culture is nothing but a cheap veneer: the cosmos is in disorder, any god responsible has abandoned his post.

Some images scattered among the rebuses are at once self-evident and indecipherable in that they hold no hidden, graspable meaning. They link, rather, to an unending overflow of sensations and associations: a nude woman falling, her face a fluttering vulva; a row of rebuses folding diagonally down the page to become a sleeve from which emerges the hand of a weary scribe. The labyrinthine complexity of Pomerand’s code and his reliance on an essentially private esotericism shift the focus from the signified to the process of signification.

Though the babble of symbols inflicts an instant feeling of the inaccessible, Pomerand considered his metagraphics to be an organic improvement on the process of writing. In the introduction to *Saint Ghetto*, Pomerand writes that he started with “a written text that I wanted to cover and clothe. / But beneath these many robes, monstrously clad, a woman of flesh and bone—for whatever she’s worth—lurks.” For Pomerand, the sensory impact of recognizable forms—trumpeting tombstones, death’s head, anus—allow a reading *before* reading. The visual riddles evoke image, theme, and mood before any discursive sense is established.

Overdosed as we are on works that tout the impossibility of communica-

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*