

Joanne Kyger and the Aesthetics of Attention

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In the popular mind Beat writing is expressionist, a “howl” of agony or an exclamation of ecstasy. Emotion is projected, expressed from the writer into the world. The attention of the reader or listener is directed to the writer as the source of what is expressed, so the person of Allen Ginsberg or Jack Kerouac, for instance, becomes as famous as his writing. Joanne Kyger, the subject of this paper, is not famous in this way. The fact that she is a woman has tended to keep her on the margins of the homosocial network of Beat writers, as recent critics, including my fellow panelists, Linda Russo and Amy Friedman, have noted. But Kyger’s writing practice also tends to direct attention away from the writer onto the world in which the writer is situated. “Being me” seems less urgent to Kyger than “being there,” the phrase that both Michael Davidson (88) and Linda Russo (“Introduction”) cite to characterize Kyger’s work.

The phrase “being there” appears in a sequence entitled *Joanne* (1970), and that title makes clear that Kyger is not wholly detached from the concept of personal identity. But she writes, “I wasn’t built in a day” (*About Now* 196). The sequence *Joanne*, like much of her later work, gives the impression of a self being built during the writing process rather than a preexisting self being expressed through the writing. Individual moments of perception supply the building blocks, and each moment is equally capable of making or unmaking what has preceded it. So the passage about “being there” reads as follows:

what I wanted to say
was in the broad
sweeping
form of being there

I am walking up the path
I come home and wash my hair
I am bereft
I dissolve quickly
I am everybody (About Now 211)

“Everybody” has nothing particular to express, but that condition clears the ground for attention to the particulars that are there all around. In more condensed form, Kyger expresses “being there” in a simple axiom: “If you are innocent of heart / you will sit there and dig it” (*About Now* 197).

The hipster’s diction in this passage, actually rather uncharacteristic of Kyger, serves as a reminder that the aesthetic at work in *Joanne* was available to the Beats, although, like the presence of women writers, it tended to get buried under a more aggressive, expressionist alternative. Among the varieties of the New American Poetry, the New York School is best known for an “aesthetic of attention,” the phrase I am applying to Kyger. The first book-length study of a New York School poet, Marjorie Perloff’s *Frank O’Hara: Poet among Painters* (1977), opens with a chapter entitled “The Aesthetic of Attention.” Recently, Andrew DuBois has published *Ashbery’s Forms of*

Attention (2006). Of more immediate relevance to Kyger is the transmission of the “aesthetic of attention” from first generation New York School writers like O’Hara and Ashbery to second generation writers like Ted Berrigan and Bill Berkson, both of whom were friends of Kyger (in Berkson’s case, fortunately, we can say he “is” a friend of Kyger). In a review of O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems*, Berrigan praised the “wide range of awareness that makes his honesty so interesting” (Berrigan 92), using “awareness” as a synonym for “attention,” as Kyger would also do. For instance, she writes of “the bright / cool awareness of fall” in an untitled late poem (1999; *About Now* 677). In an essay written at the time of O’Hara’s death, Berkson summarized: “Attention was Frank’s gift and his requirement” (Berkson 161). Berkson and Kyger were for a time housemates and for a long time neighbors in Bolinas, California, where many New York School “refugees” moved during the 1970s. They included Tom Clark and Lewis Warsh, who features in *Joanne*, which Warsh eventually published in his series of Angel Hair books. “Why are you hanging out with all these *New York* poets?” asked a friend from San Francisco who visited Kyger in Bolinas (Auto 199). One practical reason is that they offered her publishing outlets, including Berkson’s Big Sky Books (*All This Every Day*, 1975) and Kenward Elmslie’s Z Press (*The Wonderful Focus of You*, 1980).

The attentiveness of the New York School poets was trained in their close involvement with the visual arts, starting with the movement from which their name derives, New York School painting or abstract expressionism. The emphasis on abstraction in contemporary art theory, such as that of Clement Greenberg, obscures the extent to which the poets felt the painters gave them *things* to see. Frank O’Hara wrote of Jackson Pollock: “His work is not about sight [that is, in the “abstract”]. It is about

what we see, about what we *can* see. . . . we are not concerned with possibility, but actuality” (“Jackson Pollock” 32). Abstraction was a measure of the depth of actuality, the sense of penetrating to the essence of visual experience. Barbara Guest, the only woman among the first generation of the New York School poets, writes of a palm tree:

You want to reach a curve that will draw
the sky to yourself and say blue
here is your arabesque! (Guest 61)

Guest’s fellow poet, James Schuyler, wrote of a painting by Nell Blaine, “Blue is the hero” (Schuyler 167), a phrase that Bill Berkson adopted as the title for a poem that became the title poem of his first edition of selected poems (1976).

It is more than mere coincidence that one of the earliest poems, dated 1957, in the recent collected edition of Joanne Kyger (*About Now*, 2007) is entitled “Noticing Blue.” More than coincidence, but not evidence of influence, given the date of this poem, before Kyger came into contact with the New York School writers. In her own environment, Kyger was training her eye to attentiveness, acquiring the disposition that would later become the basis of her affinity with the New York School. She, too, formed important friendships with artists, from Nemi Frost—who helped Kyger complete assignments in a college art class (*Contemporary* 189)—and on through her second husband, Jack Boyce, and Bolinas companions Arthur Okamura and Donald Guravich, all of whom provide illustrations for Kyger’s collected poems. The importance of the visual arts to Kyger deserves to be the subject of a separate study. References to art and artists are scattered

throughout her poems, and they are sometimes linked explicitly to the theme of attention. For instance, in a poem resonantly titled “Narrative as Attention on a Rainy Sunday’s Phenomenology,” the word “attention” appears in connection with the art of Giotto: “the attention of Giotto’s Limbo” (*About Now* 469). Another poem from the same volume, *Just Space* (1991), sets the word “attention” in a mythic context:

I met this Canadian Indian
 who said he could bring the wind or make
 the breath of the earth rise with attention (*About Now* 461)

But this poem begins in the context of art, with a reference to Claude Monet’s Giverny: “Giverny I am for Gee Verr Nee / I see / in purple and gold this time of year” (*About Now* 461). Notice the natural movement from painting to seeing, and the distillation of color seen in the world, “purple and gold,” in this case, like the “blue” noticed as if for the first time in “Noticing Blue.” The poet rides such attention like a wave, or like the beams of light on which she envisions her follow poet Tom Clark riding into town: “I see you are coming in / on the Long Gold Rays, the Long Gold Rays” (*About Now* 461).

Where we locate Kyger in the spectrum of the New American Poetry will determine whether we emphasize the act of seeing in such a passage—“I see you are coming”—or, alternatively, its visionary dimension: “the Long Gold Rays.” Usually in Kyger’s work these levels of experience are closely integrated, and the lesson for literary history, I believe, is that the various strands within the New American Poetry are more densely interwoven than they appeared when Donald Allen separated them out in the anthology that gave the New American Poetry its name in 1960. It is worth recalling that

Allen abandoned the categories of Black Mountain, San Francisco Renaissance, Beat Generation, and New York Poets when he reissued his anthology in 1982 as *The Postmoderns*—and by the way, included Joanne Kyger for the first time. Nevertheless, the categories persist, and recent interest in the San Francisco Renaissance has tended to draw Kyger back into that milieu as her poetic birthplace in the 1950s, away from the Beats with whom she was most closely associated in the 1960s, and even further away from her New York School contacts of the late 1960s and 1970s. The consequence for tracing the aesthetic of attention in Kyger’s work can be illustrated in alternative readings of “The Maze,” written in 1958, and eventually published as the opening poem of *The Tapestry and The Web*, issued in 1965 by Donald Allen’s Four Season’s Foundation. The first reading is a famous one by Robert Duncan (*As Testimony* 1966), responding to Kyger’s performance of the poem at one of the Sunday gatherings over which Duncan and Jack Spicer presided as high priests. According to Duncan, Kyger delivered the poem on her knees, enhancing the “devotional quality” of the occasion, as Michael Davidson calls it. Then, Duncan reports:

Joanne Kyger’s poem began ‘I saw’; the sound of awe lingered as a base tone (where the word *awe* never emerges) through the diminished o of walk, all, fall, water (for the sound of water was that sound rushing) on to the close with the word *walls*. (qtd. in Davidson 190)

You can hear where Duncan is going, into the world of “awe” and myth, validated by the allusions to Homer’s *Odyssey* that surface in the later part of the poem. But the “dead bird on the sidewalk” at the opening of the poem belongs not to Homer but to William Carlos Williams. It is the object of the verb “saw,” a marker of attention to things in the

world. In an alternative reading of the poem, the repeated act of seeing appears just as insistently as the resonance of “awe” that Duncan hears in the word “saw.” Here is the first page of the poem as it appears in Kyger’s collected edition. I have marked various verbs of seeing in **boldface**:

I **saw** the
dead bird on the sidewalk
his neck uncovered
and prehistoric

At seven in the morning
my hair was bound
against the fish in the air
who begged for the ocean
I longed for their place

Behind the
tall thin muslin of the curtain
we could **see** his shadow
knocking
and we waited
not stirring
crouched by the fireplace
where the ashes blew out

later we **checked** the harbor

to **see** if it was safe

rather hoping

one had gone astray

and flung itself upon the shore

for all to **watch** (About Now 42)

If the mythic reading of Kyger in the context of the San Francisco Renaissance obscures her commitment to watching the world, so does the Buddhist reading that places Kyger in the context of the Beats. There is no question that living in Japan as Gary Snyder's wife from 1960 to 1964 and traveling through India with Snyder and Ginsberg in 1962 were formative experiences for Kyger, and her first hand exposure to Buddhism was an important component of that experience. But Kyger approached that experience, and developed from it, differently than either Snyder or Ginsberg. Certainly the mood of her India journal is very different. It is "as if O'Hara traveled India," writes Jonathan Skinner ("Generosity and Discipline: The Travel Poems"). In making this reference Skinner has in mind Kyger's sense of humor, but I would argue that the similarity to O'Hara extends also to what might be called, following O'Hara's terminology, Kyger's personism. Skinner observes: "Any sense of the foreignness, the SIZE of, India is curiously absent, the focus being largely on individuals, particular places and day to day survival." Individuals, particulars and dailiness: these are the features that Kyger's poetry shares with that of the New York School.

What this has to do with Buddhism may be expressed in a simple distinction: Kyger's Buddhism is phenomenological, turning attention to things of this world, whereas Snyder's and Ginsberg's Buddhism is psychological, primarily concerned with self-mastery, or, in its Buddhist form, self-emptying. Explaining her decision to divorce Snyder after her return from Japan, Kyger writes: "I'll never be disciplined enough to follow the strict path Gary is on. Japanese culture at this time is restrictive for me" (*Contemporary* 196). As Tony Trigilio has extensively documented, Ginsberg applied his study of Buddhism, with its concepts of emptiness (*sunyata*) and not-self (*anatman*), to correct the excesses of the Western romantic ego, a corrective that Ginsberg sorely needed, in Kyger's view. But Kyger brought a different temperament to her study of Buddhism and a different background in western tradition, as much philosophical as it was poetic. Rather than moving toward emptiness, she was moving away from the emptying of meaning that Ludwig Wittgenstein's analysis had performed on language. Recalling her decision to follow Snyder to Japan, Kyger explained, "Zen Buddhism seems to me the only path out of the 'nothingness' of western philosophy" (*Contemporary* 192).

The quest for emptiness that characterizes the Buddhism of Kyger's male contemporaries is the flip side of the expressionist aesthetic that I discussed at the beginning of this paper. Kyger's phenomenological Buddhism is a counterpart to her aesthetic of attention. In the Buddhist doctrine of the Two Truths—again, usefully expounded by Tony Trigilio—emptiness and sensory experience are interrelated, and both inform the poetry of Snyder, Ginsberg, and Kyger. But there is a different emphasis,

which emerges clearly in Kyger's relation with Philip Whalen, the male Beat poet and Zen monk whose practice of the aesthetic of attention most closely resembles Kyger's.

In *Just Space* (1991), Kyger dedicates a poem to Whalen that reciprocates an earlier dedication to her in his volume *Enough Said* (1980). Here is how she portrays herself in the poem:

I like to sit
with the birds in the morning back door sun and
if no other thoughts impede
that's ok too, even what
you're supposed to do
in the grand tradition
of empty content from mind.

[“On Reading ENOUGH SAID, for Joanne (as Per Usual),” *About Now* 427]
“The grand tradition / of empty content from mind” refers to the concept of *sunyata* or emptiness. But notice that Kyger does not posit entrance into that state as the goal of her sitting. If it happens, “that’s ok too,” but her principal goal is to be with the birds because she likes to be with them. She is not doing that because it is “what / you’re supposed to do.” However, it is what she has been called to do, not only by the birds, but also by Whalen’s writing, whose goal, as she articulates it earlier in the poem, is “to call / attention to the particular vernacular.” Kyger opens her poem with a delightful instance of “particular vernacular”: the white crown sparrow’s “pop-pop-pop-pop.” The sound attracts Kyger’s attention, but she interprets it as a sign that the sparrow is paying attention to her: “it’s me / they’re interested in.”

Central to the aesthetic of attention that I have been attempting to sketch here is the reciprocity of attention. There is no fixed subject-object relation, but rather a fluid interchange of the positions of subject and object, an intersubjectivity without a ground. In Kyger's case, it arises from Buddhist practice, but it also arises in a poetic practice common to the New American Poetry, but especially visible, I have argued, in the New York School. "It's my duty to be attentive," writes Frank O'Hara in "Meditations in an Emergency" (1954). And he proceeds to express the reciprocity of attention: "I am needed by things as the sky must be above the earth" (CP 197). Perhaps it is not quite accurate to identify this aesthetic as an alternative to expressionism; rather than expressing a single central ego, the poem is diffused with expression, a kind of abstract expressionism, if you like. But it does not feel abstract because intersubjectivity evokes persons. In the case I have just cited, Kyger stages the entire poem, as an exchange with a particular person, Philip Whalen, as Kyger does in many other examples, and of course as O'Hara does notoriously. His definition of "Personism" is the placement of the poem "between two persons instead of two pages" (*Collected* 499). In Kyger's poem, Whalen's pages become persons as they "call / attention to the particular vernacular."

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