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The Poetry Postcard Fest: Black Mountain Style

Paul E. Nelson and Margaret Lee

Sending postcards to strangers—a lost art, even quaint—has become the main gateway to the activities of a 27-year-old, literary arts-oriented, nonprofit organization. The Poetry Postcard Fest, inaugurated in 2007 by SPLAB (Seattle Poetics LAB), has become a way for poets to take their first step in aligning their cosmology and poetics. The mail art movement is said to have started with Ray Johnson in 1943, so the tradition is not exactly ancient, despite how out-of-date it feels in the age of instant communication. Jonathan Williams' Jargon Society, Fluxus, Jack Spicer, Robin Blaser, Ted Berrigan, and others have experimented with postcards as art. Building on their insights, the Poetry Postcard Fest rests on a straightforward premise: practicing spontaneous composition on postcards allows one to attune to the moment. Poets write more, edit less, and begin to experience the depths of open form, including seriality, in the great tradition of the poets published in *Black Mountain Review*, including some who did not visit Black Mountain College, such as Denise Levertov and Michael McClure, and some who were influenced by projective verse, such as Paul Blackburn.



Images of postcards received by Poetry Postcard Fest participants in 2020.

The Poetry Postcard Fest works because its process is simple. Participants register online throughout the year, for a nominal fee.¹ In July, each person receives a list of 32 registered poets. During the month of August, participants agree to send to another poet on the list an original poem on a postcard, delivered by regular mail. In 14 years, the festival has grown from 100 to 544 participants in 11 countries, 46 U.S. states, and 3 Canadian provinces. We hope to expand the fest to an even wider and more diverse international audience.

The notion of spontaneous composition on postcards comes directly from a 1995 interview produced by SPLAB with Beat/Black Mountain poet, Michael McClure, when he discussed Charles Olson's legendary essay, "Projective Verse." Regarding the poems in his *Three Poems*, McClure said:

They're spontaneous, and they *are* as they were written, and each one is a kind of a spiritual challenge and part of the adventure of the consciousness that's taking place there is I... do not allow myself to change it. And that doesn't mean that it's a grueling... task that I've laid upon myself but a very sweet possibility of taking a trip through experience that I've never taken before. Now, the poem does not really necessarily come from me. With Projective Verse, the inspiration for the poem can be outside of you, or it could be inside of you. It could be a perception or an act, or a memory, or a piece of consciousness. But it could also be—let's say it was a vase of incredibly beautiful irises. Then I look at that vase of irises and/or touch it or I smell it. It's not just looking at it. I'm aware. I have the perception in the real world of that vase of irises. It becomes part of me, of my physical being, and then it sort of like rebounds, following my breath line onto the page and is arranged on the page in terms of my breath line, and what I'm really listening to as I write it, it's not metrical foot like, light/ heavy, light/heavy, light/heavy, or any given count, but I'm listening to syllables as it happens. So you see, it's less like I'm dragging something up out of myself than it is like I'm acting in the world, like the painters² that I spoke of.³

While Olson sought a new poetics that generates its own dynamic force like the wild forces of nature, McClure's "spiritual challenge" demanded of the poet nothing less than writing in a highly aware (and embodied) state of deep listening. The Poetry Postcard Fest achieves Olson's rewilding and McClure's "acting in the world" through spontaneous composition in a shift of communication technology that triggers an alternate state of consciousness.



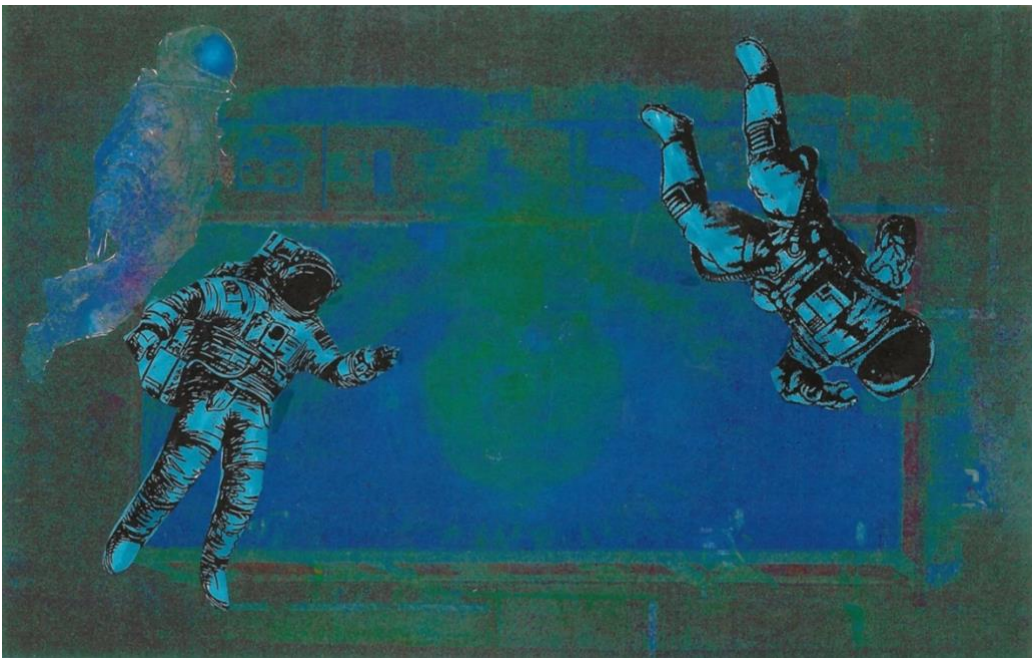
Dissidence was seen
rising through the fog
Patterns and symmetry
- Not perfection -
harshly interrupted
Disrupted
Colette Dutton 2020

Colette Dutton, "Disrupted," 2020.

As electronic communication came of age in the twentieth century, Marshall McLuhan perceived its transformative power. He claimed that its medium "completely works us over" and itself becomes the message that is communicated.⁴ A burgeoning awareness of this media shift focused scholarly attention on previous innovations in communication technology. In 1963, Eric Havelock proposed that the transition from the oral poetry of the ancient Greek epic tradition to the manuscript culture of ancient Greek drama, philosophy, and rhetoric produced more than a new set of literary forms—it changed the Greek mind.⁵ In 1979, Elizabeth Eisenstein similarly observed that the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century and the subsequent mass production of books fundamentally altered not just the kinds of books people read but the way people think.⁶ McLuhan explored the effects of technology on human consciousness and warned that burgeoning new electronic technologies could reshape a society's self-concept.⁷ Near the end of the twentieth century, Neil Postman warned that we are "amusing ourselves to death" with digitally-mediated show business. He

claimed we have created a “technopoly” that amounts to a “surrender of culture to technology.”⁸

The Poetry Postcard Fest turns back the media clock by resorting to a tactile writing surface and direct, chirographic technique. Its engagement with paper postcards induces a media shift that places participants in a particular state of mind. The Fest’s communicative power comes in the exchange. Participants anticipate the poems that other poets create for them. Each card functions as a transparent surface where sender and receiver await one another’s presence and make contact. Paper postcards become windows to the deeper self.



Tim Mateer, “Astronaut Series,” 2020.

Participant feedback from the Fest attests to its unique dynamics. Participants report a growing ease with spontaneous composition, newfound joy in poetry writing, delight in other writers’ poetry, and a palpable sense of community.⁹ Judy Kleinberg loves the “tight geography of the postcard poem.” Penelope Moffet says the Fest “forces spontaneity.” Julie Naslund observes,

I love how it augments my poetry practice, exercises my ability to listen to the ambient language and thought in my brain and follow the impulse to construct something with it. I love how it celebrates the extemporaneous. I

love, really treasure, the unexpected gift of language in my mailbox, the sustenance of a poetic community. I feel these tendrils of thought as poets reach out to each other across the globe—a poetic neural network!¹⁰

David Sherwin wrote that participating in the fest made him a better designer:

Needless to say, my first year of participation was a struggle. Breaking the rules, I wrote ideas in my notebook first, then copied the material onto postcards. While this satisfied my desire to make sure I liked what I'd written before I sent it off, I was totally missing the point: the project isn't about writing great material, as it would be impossible to force out a satisfactory piece of art each day. (What does "satisfactory" mean, anyhow? Who needs to be satisfied?) The second year, however, I vowed to try and hold to the spirit of the project. After struggling through the first dozen postcards, I became more comfortable in placing raw, nascent thoughts on paper. By the twentieth card, I could quell the editor, always hovering with his red pen in my mind. But by the time I had finished out the month, I had learned how to capture a mental gesture organically, through words. I had also sensed something novel, which I hadn't been able (yet) to bring into my daily work as a designer: a sense of improvisation and play in the midst of ever-encroaching deadlines.¹¹

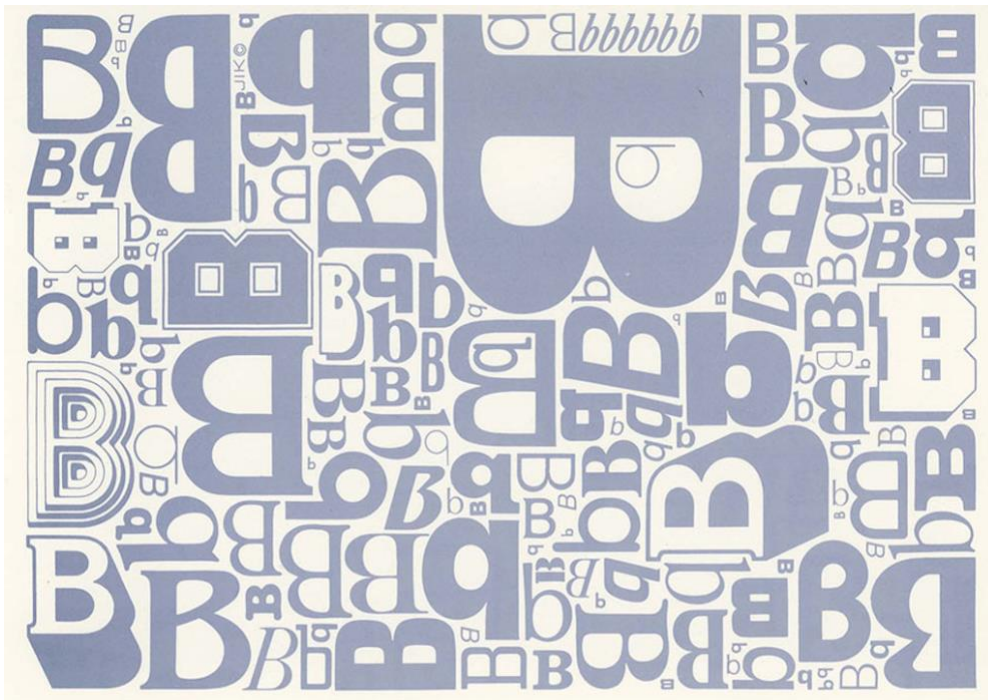


Judy Jensen/Float Press, "Black Lives Matter," 2020.

Once past the initial shock of not being able to re-write, short of tearing up a card and starting over, poetry postcards open up to seriality. “The appeal of the serial poem,” explains Nathaniel Mackey,

is that... it’s not so much a matter of it’s there and it’s done, but that again and again, again and again, again and again, you come back to certain concerns, certain motifs, certain figures... there’s the freedom of not feeling that one has been definitive, that one has closed things up, that one has shut the door on further exploration.¹²

Some participants employ serial techniques¹³ for their postcards, such as choosing a theme, using epigraphs from a particular poet on each card, using astrological aspects of that particular August, writing ekphrastic poems based on the image on the postcard, and/or starting a new card with the same line or image from the previous card and seeing how a subject evolves with that treatment. One poet included the moon phase in every postcard poem. Other participants take pleasure in making their own cards or focusing on handwriting as calligraphy. The flood of creativity has resulted in an online exhibit of postcard art, which debuted in 2021. There seems to be no end to the depth of the form.



J. I. Kleinberg, “B Card,” 2020. ©J. I. Kleinberg.

After completing the Poetry Postcard Fest in 2020, participants were encouraged to register for online workshops: Poetics as Cosmology in Fall 2020¹⁴ and (Seriality: (A Workshop) in February 2021.¹⁵ The workshops, designed to give participants a deeper understanding of the theory of spontaneous composition, took on a new dynamic during the pandemic due to the increased awareness and popularity of Zoom. These events leaned heavily on the poetics of Black Mountain poets Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, Michael McClure and Projective/Organic poets like Robin Blaser, Wanda Coleman, Anne Waldman, Nate Mackey and Eileen Myles, among others.

The notions shared in these workshops suggest a “use of speech at its least careless and least logical.”¹⁶ They encourage organic form, conceived as

...a method of apperception, i.e., of recognizing what we perceive, and is based on an intuition of an order, a form beyond forms, in which forms partake, and of which man’s [*sic*] creative works are analogies, resemblances, natural allegories. Such poetry is exploratory.¹⁷

Eileen Myles adds, “The process of the poem, the performance of it...is central to the impression I have that life is a rehearsal for the poem, or the final moment of revelation.”¹⁸ Philosopher and Soto Zen Priest, Jason Tetsuzen Wirth, describes how to use language to connect more deeply to the now and here:

You’re...experiencing your mind, at a very deep level. And that mind as you experience it more deeply, is not in a vacuum. It’s not anywhere. It’s now and here. It’s rooted in the socio-economic and ecological conditions that make it possible. It’s rooted in those conditions now and here. And so participating in, I would say, the spiritual exercise of these postcards, is already entering into something that is, if you think it all the way through, a deep bioregional awakening and conversion. In a way we’re trying for something like a spiritual revolution, and that poetry is not just an interesting thing that you can do, if you like. It’s a fundamental exercise of being here in a less harmful way.¹⁹

Do we have a “technopoly” on this continent? Have we surrendered culture to technology? Sending postcards to strangers is at very least a practice of Ahimsa²⁰, as Jason Wirth articulated above, but it also lets artists experience a deeper gesture while

establishing a community of creatives. These activities can only help the participant poets create something more useful than what the technopoly hopes we'll settle for—one more energetic distraction.

**911. Postcards from the Pandemic
(As You Say It)**

31—May—2020 Gail Gehlken,
Irvington, AL Gail!

IN THIS WORLD
the problems seep
into me

WHEN
THERE

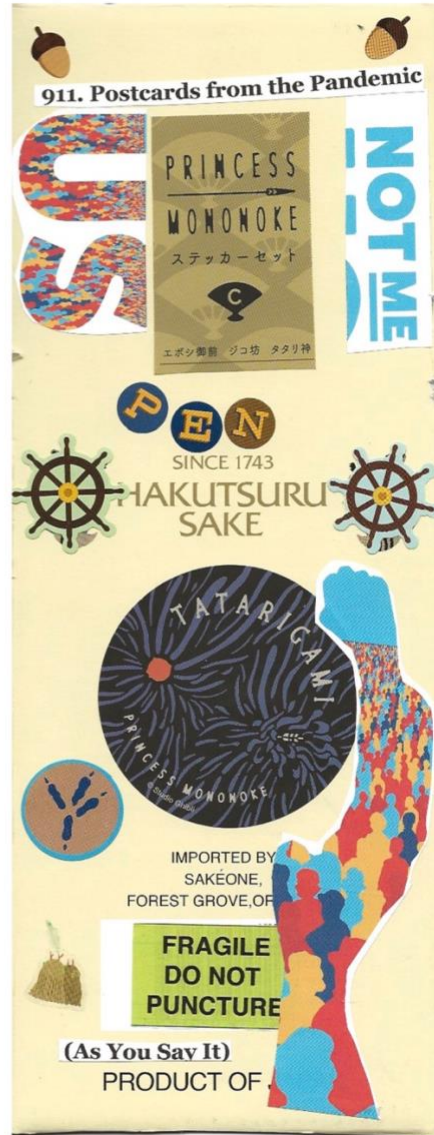
ARE

silver
stars

on black velvet;
this is followed by
brown fog
and
auto sounds.

Michael McClure

& the sounds of police cars
driving into lines of
protestors. “When the
cuffs are on it’s
‘game over’” says
my brother the
cop but it
didn’t stop
the knee
ended
the life of George
Floyd. The problems
of empire’s maintenance
seep into you
as you say it
as I say it
in gray fog
aching for a
turning point.



Paul Nelson, “911. As You Say It” from the series *Postcards from the Pandemic*, 2020.

Visit the Poetry Postcard Fest Exhibit: www.poetrypostcardfestexhibit.org

Learn more or register for the Poetry Postcard Fest: www.popo.cards

¹ The modest registration fee helps to sustain the organization that developed the Fest in 2007. Postcard registration provided SPLAB with approximately 13% of its revenues in 2020.

² McClure was referring to Jackson Pollock but Clyfford Still was also a huge inspiration for McClure, who loved Still's claim: "Demands for communication are presumptuous and irrelevant" (<http://theoria.art-zoo.com/statement-clyfford-still/>).

³ <https://paulenelson.com/2012/10/20/happy-80th-michael-mcclure/>

⁴ *The Medium Is the Massage* (New York: Random House, 1967).

⁵ *Preface to Plato, A History of the Greek Mind* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1963).

⁶ *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

⁷ *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

⁸ *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1985). *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1992).

⁹ See interviews at www.popo.cards.

¹⁰ <https://popo.cards/2020/06/30/your-popo-blurb-here/>

¹¹ <https://www.davidsherwin.com/blog/sending-postcards-to-strangers>

¹² Nate Mackey, *American Prophets*, (Seattle: Seattle Poetics Lab, 2018) p. 196.

¹³ More on serial form at: <https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2015/serial-impulse-at-gemini-g-e-l.html>.

¹⁴ <https://paulenelson.com/2020/08/23/poetics-as-cosmology/>

¹⁵ <https://paulenelson.com/seriality-a-workshop/>

¹⁶ Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) p241.

¹⁷ Denise Levertov, *New & Selected Essays*, (New York: New Directions, 1992) p68.

¹⁸ Eileen Myles, *Not Me*, (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 1991) p201.

¹⁹ Wirth, Jason M. "SPLAB Mission & Vision." SPLAB (Seattle Poetics LAB), March 9, 2021.

<http://splab.org/about-splab/splab-mission-vision/>.

²⁰ Ahimsa is the Hindu and Buddhist doctrine of refraining from harming any living being.