

no longer
inside
our own
circles



damon kruckowski
& jill magi

NO LONGER INSIDE OUR OWN CIRCLES

DAMON KRUKOWSKI &
JILL MAGI



#57

ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES

Essay Press's Stereo Series seeks to encourage collaborative, polyphonic approaches to contemporary prose.

CONTENTS

<i>Series Editors</i>	Maria Anderson Andy Fitch Ellen Fogelman Aimee Harrison Courtney Mandryk Victoria A. Sanz Travis A. Sharp Ryan Spooner Randall Tyrone	Introduction by Essay Press	vii
		No Longer Inside Our Own Circles	1
		Author Bios	44
<i>Series Assistants</i>	Cristiana Baik Ryan Ikeda Christopher Liek		
<i>Book Design</i>	Aimee Harrison		

Late in 2013, as Essay Press was just beginning to reemerge, we asked authors from Ugly Duckling's [Dossier Series](#) (one of our all-time favorite series) to pair up and discuss each other's books. Damon Krukowski and Jill Magi met electronically in the process of putting together this arresting epistolary exchange—a piece that, through its invention of a textured, polyphonic prose combining elements from each author's ongoing interdisciplinary pursuits, inspired our current Stereo Series. We recommend that you absorb its explorations of “the space between what is known, seen, remembered, memorialized, mapped,” while playing, perhaps on repeat, [this lovely Damon & Naomi diptych track](#).

—Essay Press

**NO LONGER INSIDE
OUR OWN CIRCLES**

Dear Damon,

I read your book. Lovely. Of course there is more to say—

But here is one idea about how we might proceed:

I picked up a copy, this summer, of a collaboratively written text between John Baldessari and Barbara Bloom. I'm a huge fan of Bloom's work. The book is curious, and I don't know if it's successful, but it's a conversation between them centered around one image sent by Barbara to kick things off. It is a chair.

What if we send things (images) back and forth? An image? Just a word, a noun? Or, a snippet of sound as thing?

Looking forward,
Jill

Hello Jill,

I too enjoyed your book. Lots of echoes!

I also took a look at your blog—you are in Abu Dhabi?!

I'm happy to have this conversation any way that we can. We're online so images, sounds, links all easily accessible—maybe even more accessible than we are to one another at the moment, given our massive geographic and time difference. I'm writing you from home in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Tell me: is Abu Dhabi like a place without memory?

Yrs,
Damon

p.s. Here's my [blog](#), fyi.

Dear Damon,

Yes, Jonny and I are in Abu Dhabi. I love your question about Abu Dhabi and memory. Maybe I'll send you an image to "answer" your question. Cambridge seems to me to be a place dominated by a certain kind of memory—is it too much? Too American? Too colonial? We're headed to Venice for the weekend. Maybe I'll also send you an image from there—

Best,
Jill

Hi Jill—

I think I'm comfortable living in Cambridge because it's haunted.

Here's [a recording of rain in a copper drain pipe](#) on the side of an old Harvard building, where I go to use the gym.

Are you going to Venice for the water?

Best,
Damon

Dear Damon,

Here are two answers to your questions:

Abu Dhabi is a memory-instigating place. And it is infused with memories that don't have to do with Abu Dhabi.

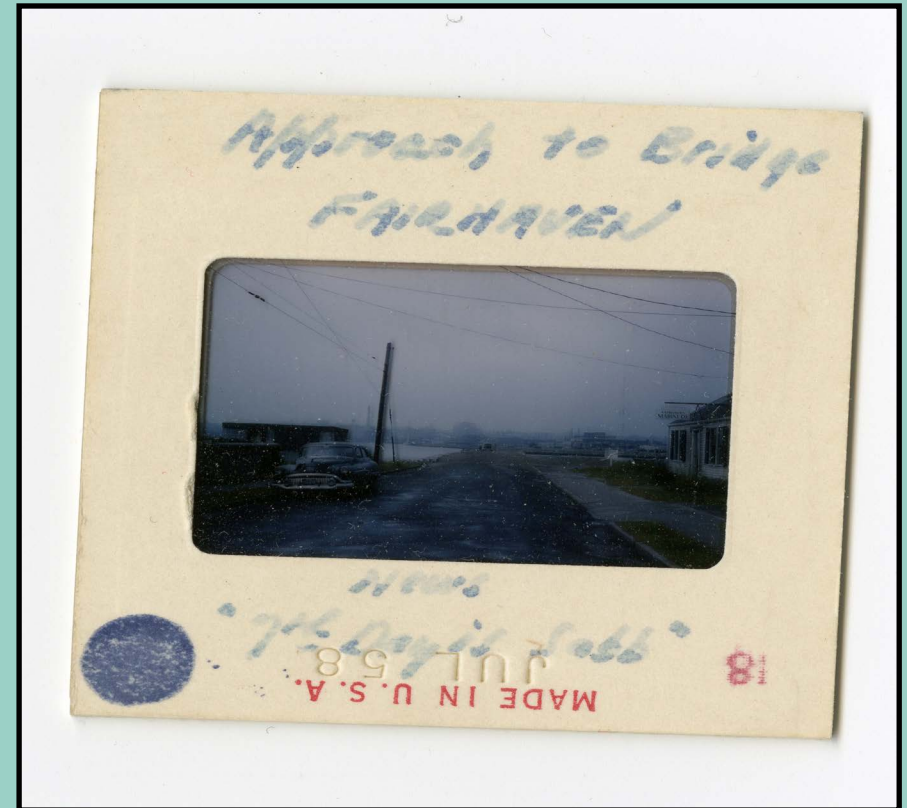
In other words: many many people here are from somewhere else. At our local shopping center, the Madinat Zayed plaza, workers and residents of all kinds line up at the Lu-Lu Exchange where you can convert your dirhams into your home currency and send money: what you have probably come here for.

But unlike New York, where I think it is nearly the same, depending who you talk to and what circles you travel in, this place hasn't yet decided to bury the layers of the past. Or it hasn't had enough time—the city is only 50 years old. About New York: I'm thinking of the excavation of the African burial ground near, ironically, the federal building in Lower Manhattan. Or going to get lunch and finding that your favorite pizza spot has turned into a Swatch store. That really happened to me once.

Outside my Abu Dhabi window I see shiny tall skyscrapers—and in fact one sequence of towers is called “Shiny Towers.” And I also see the fort where this city began. Across the street from the fort is the oldest mosque. And stretching out for miles is a grid of ‘70s and ‘80s lower-rise architecture, in shades of white and beige. Some of these buildings are in various stages of demolition because of a mistake the builders made: mixing concrete with seawater. The salt breaks them down. Walking past, you can look in on former residents’ wallpaper choices: a peek into their memories.

No, we didn’t think we went to Venice for the water, but when we arrived, we realized we picked an opposite city from Abu Dhabi: all walking, surrounded by water and fog and an excess of art. We thought some more: opposites loop back on themselves, don’t they? Because of course Venice represents capitalism and modernity—hence, the excess of art. Abu Dhabi is the new capitalism. There is barely any time for art.

Here is an image to share—a watery photograph taken by my grandfather. This slide slipped out of the boxes of our shipment and one of the movers, when our boxes arrived, handed this to me personally. Why was I meant to see this image? Why had it been saved and not discarded?



I want to ask you about your book. You begin: “How quickly the tales we tell ourselves and each other, the small rationalizations, the hopes and excuses, even the snatches of songs and poems, build in our lives not to a crescendo, but into a wall that blocks the view.”

After *Afterimage*, Damon, what is next? Are you dreaming of your next book? Or of never writing another book again? What does this have to do with your father?

Sometimes I think that making things comes from the father, and folding what already exists comes from the mother.

Thank you for the sounds of rain. It reminds me to go to Java to hear gamelan. Or put in that CD.

Yours,
j.

Dear Jill,

I’m touched that you brought your grandfather’s photos with you to Abu Dhabi—or are you planning to stay? I assumed it was a temporary move, but I assumed it might be a place without memory, too.

The houses made with salt-water concrete make me think of a story I read about North Korea—the writer had ordered cappuccino at the airport and was served coffee with egg white on top.

Maybe Abu Dhabi will be subsumed by image? Water was the means to power for the Venetians. For us here by Fairhaven, Massachusetts, it wasn’t the water so much as the industry alongside it, still churning away in your grandfather’s photo, now drowning us in its disuse. In late capitalism, the photo itself would seem to be a means for power: the view of workers’ houses, whether or not they house anybody; the wealth reflected by Shiny Towers, whatever is or isn’t in them; the image of military force, whether or not it can accomplish anything. The mover rescued that photo for you, recognizing it as something of value.

Or maybe the mover saw it as a piece of memory, valuable for that reason, and I'm again showing my ignorance of the part of the world you are in by shortchanging this aspect of its value there. People lining up to send money home are keeping their ties to places and times past—the opposite of those emigrants to the U.S. who did all they could to cut ties to the past, to lose track of the memories that had inevitably moved with them.

Which is one way of answering your question about my book, and my father, a war refugee, born into a cosmopolitan part of Poland, exiled as a Jew, rescued by the Japanese, reborn an American—a New Yorker, to be exact. Cosmopolitan once more, but without the external marks of race and class with which he began. When I was a boy, my father forbade me to learn Polish. He wouldn't sign the school permission form that would have elected it as my second language. He told me it was "a useless language." We compromised on Russian. (I've since forgotten nearly all but the alphabet and a few lines of rote-learned poetry, alas.)

His memories of Poland and the war, communicated to me in fragments only, are the background to my book. That opening you quote is an image that came to me of the way memory (or narrative more generally) can distort or even block our view of the present. One of the problems I try to

write through in the book is how lyric does and doesn't participate in that version of storytelling—this is why it ends with a poem. I also thought of *Afterimage* as a way of writing through a block I experienced after publishing my first book, *The Memory Theater Burned*. This is connected to a story I tell near *Afterimage's* beginning, about my father (mis?)identifying with the previous book's opening poem. *Afterimage* is self-consciously structured as a "ring" (my understanding of that form is from Mary Douglas's book *Thinking In Circles*) with this idea placed at its center:

Do we only tell each other's stories? Ask others to tell our own? Can we tell our own? Or is that what stories are for—to tell someone else's, and allow another to tell yours?

My new writing is third-person narrative—someone else's story. The main character is K., lifted from Kafka but obviously my own initial as well. I'm writing and publishing it serially, on my blog—it's called *Self Storage*, and I'm using Kafka's *The Castle* as a model. K. is the employee of a self-storage facility, whose mysteries he attempts to navigate...

Whose story are you telling now/next?

Best,
Damon

Dear Damon,

So many confluences: my father, a refugee of World War II from Estonia, arriving in New York City after a year in a displaced-persons camp in Sweden, wanting above all else to be an American boy. Never teaching us Estonian, except he would read to my sister and I from a storybook about a snail that climbed up an apple tree. The only words I knew: “snail” and “appletree.” My father hiding for weeks in a potato cellar at a relative’s farm. My grandfather’s pride when I learned German.

So while I signed up for Estonian language lessons as a 20-something-year-old in the East Village, those who come from “minor languages” wish to shed them? Do you ever miss Polish? Can you if you never “had” it?

The first poet I studied and loved, before I thought about being a poet, was Charles Simic, because I thought that if my father could speak with depth about what he experienced, he would write poems like that.

I took over the need to tell in my family. I often wonder why I feel the need to research and tell. Why my siblings do not. I am not better than them—just obsessed—or I am an artist, and the family story was my first palette? Why? Because of the mix of telling and silence. Not to reconcile those two, but to work with both, is to be an artist, I think. My parents never wanted me to be an artist, for fear of how I would earn a living. They were right, but it could not be helped. I was born into the wrong class.

Damon, breaking through middle-class politeness, if I may, how do you afford to tell stories that are not for the commercial market?

Grandfathers and water. I inherited my maternal grandfather’s slide collection when my mother passed away and my father had to move into assisted living. We siblings were clearing out their house—it was a terrible weekend but it had to happen. I ended up with the slides. There are five boxes of them. Some of the slides are my father’s also. We took them to Abu Dhabi because I signed a three-year contract. This move is semi-permanent, we think. There were no good jobs for us “back home.”

The man who handed me the slide was from the Philippines. He is also here in Abu Dhabi to work.

What will I do with them? The answer to this question is the project I embark on next. But without words. Because I crave non-narrative—I'm drawn to abstraction. Note: Deleuze says the two are not in opposition, and I agree and want to remember this; the painter working on a figure works in small abstract spaces, and then stands back in order to see the whole. Is there a reverse process?

Speaking of abstractions, but not in the Western art-historical sense, in Abu Dhabi, patterns abound. Latticework. Interlocking pavers, the uniformity of the Emirati national dress: abayas for women and the dishdashas for men. The repetition of the arches and domes and minarets of the mosques. The grid of this city and the five-times-a-day call to prayer.

A plan: scan two slides at a time, a random pairing. Do this in January for hours every day, Monday through Thursday. Write about the week's worth of scans on Friday. Go to the beach on the weekend. Do this for four weeks.

I look forward to some day meeting the K. of your story. The J. of *SLOT* continues as a J. in *LABOR*. This time she is an archeologist with tenure who is obsessed with collecting as many old card-catalog cabinets as possible. One of her interlocutors, a historian named Sadie, files imaginary complaints

and takes them down to the edge of the brackish water (something like the Hudson) and deposits them there in a medical-waste drop box. Somehow these documents end up in the labor archive and the teaching artist named Miranda finds her own grievance there and eats it. An "I" pulls the papers from her mouth and sets them out in the sun—to dry the saliva.

Have you noticed that our exchange keeps coming back to water? I am amazed that you know this place of my grandfather's picture: Fairhaven, its waters—

Damon, I also shudder with familiarity when I read *Afterimage*. It's almost too much. For example, pages 13 to 14. The first time I read your book I had to put it down there. Right after *Threads* was published, my Uncle Eino died. My father had no one left to talk to in Estonian. Was this the beginning of his memory loss? What he's now diagnosed with: "cognitive decline"? But I trace a further-back beginning...

Yours, with faith in words,
Jill

Dear Jill,

Many shocks of recognition in your letter. Charles Simic was my teacher; I used to drive up to New Hampshire every week from Cambridge to take his classes. I couldn't have formulated it then, but I think you are right that he is able to write about trauma in a way that wasn't practiced in my family, but might have been acceptable had it been. He also introduced me to the Surrealists, another generation writing out of war—Breton learning automatic writing at a military hospital treating brain injuries.

Struck by your use of “non-narrative” as equivalent to abstraction. I don't know the Deleuze reference (his writing remains opaque to me) but I take it to mean that narrative and abstraction need not be in conflict? That's a neat formulation for something I admire in Kafka and Beckett. I think I'll join you in putting it to work as a goal.

And I welcome your introducing class into the conversation. It's always part of the immigrant story in any case—a change in society means a change in societal position, up or down. The war version is usually down; it certainly was for my father. My

grandfather, a lawyer who spoke half a dozen languages, drove a truck when he arrived in the U.S. Eventually, he found his way back to a middle-class existence, working for the Voice of America. He died when I was too young to observe such things for myself, but according to my father any loss of position didn't matter much to my grandfather—survival had trumped the rest. However, to my father it seems to have been painful. The story of the truck in Elizabeth, New Jersey is one he did share with me, often, as a boy.

So yes please let's “break through middle-class politeness.” I've never been particularly drawn to what's known as transgressive literature (my own writing is almost comically opposite), yet its strategies have always seemed familiar to me. Maybe because voicing a story that's learned through silence is itself transgressive?

I've never made a living from writing, and didn't set out to. I did think once that we might live from publishing, but that hasn't materialized. Naomi and I make some money from the arts, primarily from music, and we make some using our skills related to publishing: design for Naomi, editing for me. But the only reliable salary with benefits we've had was when I was teaching, which I will do again given the opportunity because it made things so much

easier for us. Without it—the situation we’re in now—we manage but it’s a tightrope. Like everyone else self-employed we’re squeezed by health care costs etc. Nevertheless, we are very aware that in the big picture we live like kings: a beautiful home, peaceful surroundings, plentiful food. We don’t have “security,” but who does? (Also, we don’t have children, which judging by friends and relatives makes living without even an illusion of security easier. We can only screw things up for ourselves.)

How about you? Did you set out to be a professional writer?

Something I hope you might speak further of is your attraction to abstraction. The plans for your books are narratives on their own—the new one sounds particularly disciplined, like a Fluxus event score. Might the narrative be the structure of the writing, the non-narrative the content?

Yrs,
Damon

Dear Damon,

Thanks again for your words.

No, I never set out to make money from writing. I thought I was going to do the PhD in sociology and be an academic, but I had no family support, very little understanding from my friends at the time who were all in the arts—Lower-East-Siders working in film, in art directing, freelance styling. So my time at The New School in social theory was a bit of a disaster. I dropped out and now say to people “poetry was the shape of the argument I wanted to make.”

Yes: breaking a family silence is transgression and, like you, when I found those texts that could narrate *around* the event, treating *the way* a story is handled with as much care and attention as the story itself, I found a kind of blueprint for how to write. I am speaking of encountering Leslie Scalapino’s work in particular—in Laura Hinton’s “Women and Fiction” class up in Harlem at CCNY in 1997.

Class: Jonny and I don’t have children either. That’s been a deliberate choice. Jonny went down the

indie-rock road, back when the East Village was the place to do that, but his music was always a little too bizarre to “get a record deal” and that probably worked out for the best. We’ve both been administrators—me in higher education, Jonny in corporate-events production and for a while as a bookkeeper for artists. After September 11 we both decided that we did not want to die at work, at jobs we didn’t love. Sorry if that comes off as melodramatic. It is just simply true. So we dove into art full steam. Luckily we both love teaching.

The last couple of years, though, the precariousness in academia, our mounting debt, and being an adjunct gave me a good deal of anxiety. Something had to change, so I widened my search and here I am—teaching expository writing in the context of the theme “Textiles and Culture.” Two weekends ago my students made a loom. We practice thinking together in order to write good essays. Everything is fine.

Abstraction: I am not quite sure what I mean at times, pitting narrative against abstraction. I don’t think they are opposite enough for that thought framework to be productive. So let me back up: I am drawn to patterns, to the grid, to Agnes Martin, to the shapes of tile work here in Abu Dhabi, the intensity of the orange Rothko I used to go and

visit at the Art Institute of Chicago on cold days. Something paired down in order to rev things up.

I sometimes look for the same effect in writing—but I end up confused. For example, I read Jackson Mac Low’s *154 Forties* and even taught that book and [recorded a piece for the folks at Counterpath](#) who published it and I loved that book. Many of my students came along for the ride and some called the work pretentious. But is it abstraction?

Tell me about narrative and what you think it is. What does K. of your manuscript do? Speak? Move in and out of rooms? What does this line of conversation have to do with the recording you made and sent to start us off—the sounds of water in Cambridge?

When I stitch words that I have randomly photocopied and enlarged from my notebook, I feel like I am walking the line from wanting to say something to loving the act and shape of words and handwriting as much as anything that can be narrated. I suppose this meshes with your suggestion of a Fluxus-type book on my horizon. I think of it more as “composition by ritual”—if Fluxus privileges the act and the labor, I still want to consider revision, shaping, maybe even a narrative that builds. The ritual to get there evident still in the product.

I'll sign off now, in the middle of a slightly foggy day
alongside the Gulf—

All my best,
Jill

Dear Jill,

It's been blank here too—not foggy but overcast, an even gray sky with the last leaves on the trees. Yesterday evening there was a bright full moon. Now the whole landscape looks bleary, like it stayed up all night.

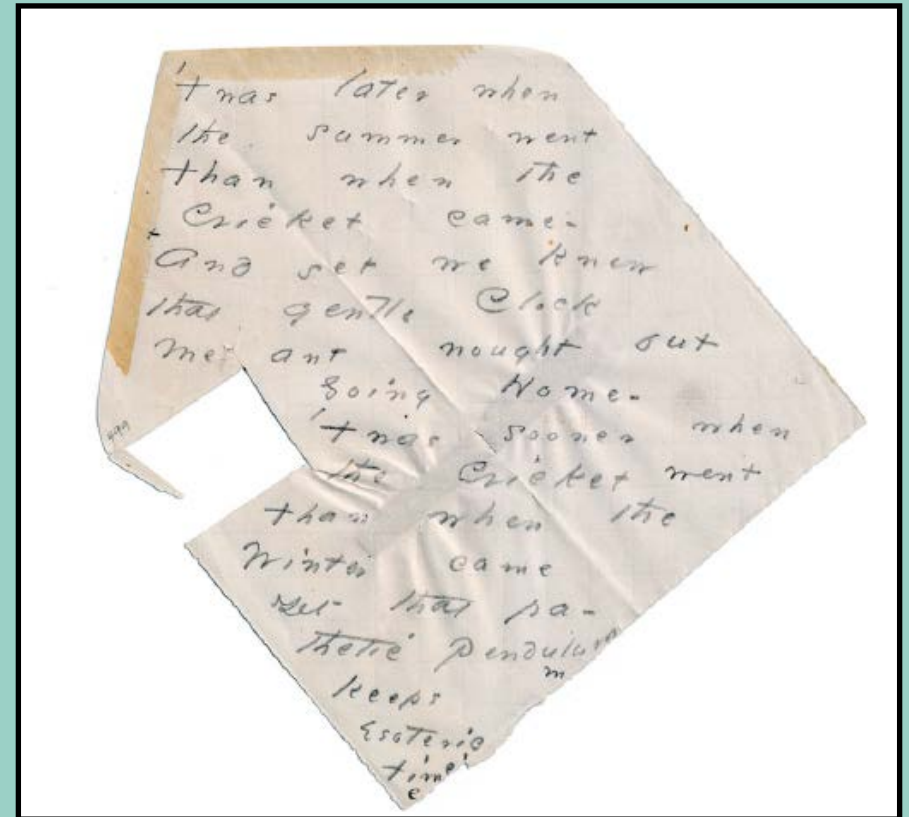
Interesting how our correspondence is both practical and literary. Anna chose our manuscripts in part for their hybrid quality—maybe they share a similar mix as the topics in this discussion?

The words I want to mix from your latest note are poetry, argument, narrative and abstraction. I like your description of poetry as a form of argument. That is something I usually reserve in my mind for narrative, like in those eighteenth-century tables of contents that specify the “argument” of each chapter. Your associations of these terms—poetry with argument, narrative with abstraction—are opposite to the ones I would have (lazily?) made, but help explain the pull I always feel toward prose poetry, and poetic prose. Perhaps these are forms for narrative abstraction; and for poetic argument.

That's what I find in Beckett and Kafka, to answer your question: a mix of argument and poetry, narrative and abstraction. Among the practical results I observe in both is a narrative that never ends—an argument that continues book to book, each one not ending so much as stopping for other reasons.

In that way, their work is like poets whose work can be "collected" without regard for the volumes they originally published. Of course it's poets whose work can't be removed from specific books that tend to interest me more.

I owe you an image—here's one I saw recently at a gallery in New York:



This at a remarkable show in the Drawing Center, of manuscripts by Emily Dickinson and Robert Walser. (They generously make the catalogue available [online](#).)

The categories prose and poetry seem useless in approaching this work written to the shape of the page. That might be another way for me to try and describe what I find in Beckett and Kafka.

Yours,
Damon

Dear Damon,

I want to begin this letter by coming back to our books. Your *Afterimage*. My *SLOT*.

Let's look at the covers. Anna brilliantly came up with dotted lines vectoring, intersecting as sitelines for *SLOT*: perforations, something architectural, random, a bit askew. Cut out and fold along the lines and make your own. In so doing, did Anna mean to refer to the running bibliography throughout *SLOT*? An invitation to study? Looking at the cover, thinking about the pages of citations inside, I am thinking of the relationship between texture and text and "techne"—to make.

And your cover: it has a slot cut right into it in order to reveal—to reveal what? Your cover begins with an abstraction—maybe it is a stand of ferns? Maybe we are looking at the sky or the sea? And then when you open the cover, there is "the image" in its fullness—only to reveal that it is a photograph of looking through a hole in a fence. The aperture captures another aperture! This brings me to...

Between.

Both books are about the between—the space between what is known, seen, remembered, memorialized, mapped. This between space is not imprecise, waffling, unsure. Rather, it is something very surely somatic, sonic, not necessarily abstract, but not fully narrative either. In my book *Threads* I wrote “the epistemology of touch demands attention to presence and absence both.” I was writing about “refugee,” a word I also find in *Afterimage*.

In *SLOT* I wrote, “Read new columns held damply” and was puzzled by the phrase so I didn’t edit it out. I am a refugee’s daughter and became even more so after September 11.

Now, in Abu Dhabi, I am learning that the image is about devotion, which spawns a private narrative that resides inside the one who is willing to be open to repetition. Geometrics abound.

Question: how did you read the photographs in *SLOT*? Few have asked me about this, and in most reviews this goes unmentioned. So, in a moment of directness, if I may, tell me: what are seagulls doing in my book? Whose hands? What threads? Which windows?

How did you know that *Afterimage* should contain photographs? Here is how I “read” the presence of those images by Naomi:

They bookend your book. So we start and end with the “non-verbal.” But we are still reading—always reading. An image is to be read. Visual artists know this. The images narrate. The photographs oscillate between close ups and distances, so I am dialed in, flirting with abstraction, with texture, and then I am dialed back out, to a scene: a storefront, a field, a building, a wall. Isn’t this what your book does? A feeling imprints itself onto the specifics of a street, an airport. And this is what Deleuze writes about in “The Smooth and the Striated”—how even a figurative painting is abstract as the painter works on the image: close up, in smooth and undifferentiated space. The painter takes steps back in order “to see” and then steps right back up to the surface again in order “to sense.” Striated space creates smooth and vice versa. Therefore Deleuze answers the question you posed to me about narrative versus abstraction, poetry versus prose. This is “and” instead of “versus.” This is what I am trying to enact in my work.

The images in your book may be from one specific place. Certainly location is a narrative thread in *Afterimage*. But if I don’t recognize that place, or if the images move coherently from one place

to another, it doesn't matter. Begin somewhere/
anywhere and arrive at the same place/any place.
This is desirable, true. This is another example of
narrative alongside abstraction.

Why do so many experimental writers mistake
specificity in storytelling with solipsism? Maybe that
was an obsession in the '90s and we're done with
that now. All I know is that when authors tell me their
coordinates, I trust them to also take me into these
spaces without a map.

I note the change in the surfaces of the paper of
your book—the smooth of the image, the grain of
the pages of print. Pages of print are meant to be
apprehended visually. Writers of poetry know this.
How about the haptic? Yes, this is activated in the
physicality of *Afterimage*.

Finally, I note the instances of horizons, but framed
on a diagonal—I mean, that the photographer has
titled. Her body, her camera machine. Or is this
the truth of the scene? We do not always have to
look straight ahead while standing up. Is the viewer/
reader then invited to straighten things out? The
spine of the book provides stability.

You write:

At the Museum of the Moving Image, an
exhibit on nineteenth-century motion-
picture games explains this principle: when
vision is interrupted, the mind retains an
afterimage of what the eye had seen. If
a light illuminating suggestive images
flashes, the darkness between causes us to
merge this afterimage with the next, which
we sum to one in flux rather than two in
succession. If a light is constantly shown on
successive images, we see only a blur. That
is: *interruption is necessary to the illusion
of continuity.*

I await your read of *SLOT*—

Yours,
Jill

Dear Jill,

Given my own book this may be no surprise, but I took the photos in stride when I read *SLOT*. They appear in slots (facing pages), as do the bibliographic pages, and I understood them to be sources and/or invitations, like those texts. Something that did puzzle me was their increasing frequency toward the end. But looking back, I see that is not accurate at all—it was my impression as I read front to back (as I read for the plot?), though in fact the structure is very symmetrical. I'd like to know more about that rhythm of the slots marked by photos or references. Did you work from a plan (like the architectural memorials in the text), and/or improvise?

The photos in *Afterimage* were added without much conscious regard to the text, although I felt (and Anna did too) that the book would benefit from them. Naomi and I had traveled together to all the places mentioned, and she had taken photos the whole time, so I asked her to add them. She was concerned they would seem either illustrative or irrelevant—neither of which she wanted—but I felt sure it would be something else again. In the end, Naomi made the

selection and the sequence, so I didn't play much of a role other than talking her into it!

The cover, too, Naomi designed—the dye-cut came about in collaboration with Anna, as they worked out how to make use of UDP's letterpress alongside the color images.

That said, I like your reading of both the cover and the photos a lot. I wanted the images there because I love them, and because they would help structure the book. But I don't feel they structure the text, which I'm happy to have appear in other ways as well. Do you feel like that about your texts? I mentioned the "collected poems" phenomenon in my previous letter, with some disdain for the way it disregards poets' potential use of the book. At the same time, I like the way poems can be free from the page: memorized, quoted out of context, fragmented.... This is a link to song lyric, for me—bits of them pop up all over the place. But again this is a reason I'm writing prose, which flows into any margin on any given page, but always remakes its form as it does.

A deep sympathy I feel with *SLOT* is in this line:

"Am I turning to poetry? As an escape or to make sense?"

In that first question, I hear, “am I turning to stone” or “salt”—transforming—as well as the primary meaning picked up by the second question. And that second question is what gave me the writer’s block that led to *Afterimage*.

Yrs,
Damon

Dear Damon,

I had no plan for the images in *SLOT*, though I had been experimenting for a couple of years with photographs and texts. I tried floating text on top of photographs. I tried something like captioning. But I think I rested on the photos mostly as double-page spreads all to themselves because of the need to rest. If reading the text was the trail, I wanted images as the occasional bench. To rest.

Toward the end of *Afterimage* you ask, “Is this why I stopped writing poems, stopped breaking lines? It seemed like it was saying less, rather than more. I wanted to include it all, so I wrote prose.” This passage comes after your really interesting discussion of memory (all memory as socially constructed, shared), and the dream as the only “individual” memory. Then, if this is true, you begin to wonder why you aren’t writing fiction. With fiction available to you as an option, you ask yourself, in italics, almost in a scream: “*why are you bothering to tell the truth?*”

The images in *SLOT* come from the exhaustion of your italicized line. In *SLOT*, to tell is to argue. To accrue evidence for another kind of memorialization.

I mean, photographs *are* narrative. I do not believe in any pure genre. I believe that words point to images, and that images point to words, so it's not "the visual versus the verbal" at all. But I felt the need for a texture change, a resting place, a new language in a different register: photographs. In working with photos I felt free to step into unexpected territory.

The photo shoots were decidedly energetic in a way that some of the writing was not, honestly. I still remember having a studio downtown with the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and taking pieces of fabric (tiny shrouds) and playing with their placements over museum blueprints. Placing, arranging, taking the photo, trying again. In the physicality of that work I found another register to my argument. Playful almost. Involving touch. And the pieces of thread I glued into tiny holes in my studio walls and then the tangle that ensued. I listened to Alice Coltrane while trying to untangle, snapping photos.

And did I have a strategy for the sequencing of photos in the overall book? Not really. I activated my early training as a graphic designer and I thought

about punctuating the through-line of the whole book. I dropped the photos in with that kind of spirit. (But I still don't understand the seagulls. Maybe someone reading this some day will write in to me on this question!)

You end your book's text with a poem, a rather devastating poem—the survivors gather and (they will die) you are deferring to them, showing respect. Time is moving in many directions and history is located all over: Florida, Wilno, Brazil. There is music, literally, in the poem and there is the music of the poem.

It is interesting to me that in a text that questions poetry so much, you end with the linebreak, the fragment, the lyric. As a goodbye? And now it's fiction? Naomi offers a blue-sky photo to end the words, the end of the poem.

I have been thinking about the word "curriculum" lately. At first I thought the etymology of the word had something to do with "circle" but I wasn't quite right. I looked it up and found it comes from "running" and "course"—so, running around a track. I love this idea of knowledge gained or made by circling, racing around, not quite arriving. And repetition. As "sense" and "escape" all at once? I think about the last pages of your book as a curriculum, a circling.

Damon, can you say what *Afterimage* taught you? What you want it to teach others? I know we artists are not supposed to be didactic, but if we accept this idea of curriculum not as achievement or pre-measured dose of knowledge, but as encircling, can you say what you found on the inside of that circle?

I could say that your book teaches me to let go of the father.

SLOT was published in the same year my mom died. I can say that I learned that the book is a haunt and I am glad to never read publicly from it again, which reminds me of one of your ending questions: “who is living?” I think a book is alive and then dead—and sometimes I think there is little difference in the energy of either state.

Yours,
Jill

Dear Jill,

I had thought your seagull question was rhetorical! I’m happy to give an answer. In the section that precedes it, this line stood out to me:

“Don’t shore your light up on my sea.”

You talk in your letter about the play with materials for the photos. To me this line has that kind of joyful play, the kind that often shows up in songs. There’s a reversal of expectation built on cliché (you’re the light of my life...), the echo of a blue one-liner (don’t shove your...up my...) and surprising grammar (“shore” as a verb...“sea” with a possessive) that makes it memorable—you could find these all in Dylan’s best lines.

Which gives me a good excuse to send you another sound file—[here’s “Please Mrs Henry.”](#) from the original (bootleg) *Basement Tapes*. Dylan makes himself laugh before the last chorus:

“Don’t shore up my sea” would fit the rhythm.

Anyway, when I hit the seagull I had that line in my craw. Looking now I see there was a lot of water happening in that part of the book. This was the bit that registered, however.

But as I said in my previous note, I took the photos in stride. And your explanation that “words point to images, and images point to words” makes perfect sense to me. We speak of images in poetry all the time—and poetry in images, for that matter.

That’s a puzzle I’m always thinking of, in fact: how is it that we use the word “poetry” so easily, yet can’t say what it is? Even sports clichés make use of it. It’s as if everyone is comfortable with the idea of poetry (or the quality of “poetic”) but no one is comfortable with poems. Least of all poets.

Well that was a flip punch line, but I know from your book and our exchange that it might work in this company. And it’s a way of approaching a question from your last letter, about the poem that ends *Afterimage*. I like very much that you saw Naomi’s photo as the true ending, which is more accurate to the publication—the book, perhaps, has more of an open ending than its text. Because yes, I meant the poem as a goodbye. Not to writing, or even to poetry, but to the concerns that had me so wrapped up I had to make a book of them to try and untangle

myself. The line break, in the context of *Afterimage*, belongs to plaques that memorialize the dead, and to song. In that final meditation before the poem, the one you quote from in your letter (“Is this why I stopped writing poems, stopped breaking lines?”), lyric is distinguished from broken lines, much the way that “poetic” can be free from “poetry.” So the poem at the end is meant to be lyrical, like a song, but I make no claims for it as poetry. It is, I think, among the worst poems I’ve ever written. But I wanted to let that kind of judgment go—to let the broken lines admit the present, admit lyric, admit the poetic, without holding to any particular idea of poetry.

Also that poem is outside the circle of the text—it’s the “latch” that Mary Douglas describes as an addendum to the ring structure. To keep it closed, perhaps.

As poets, we are I think both drawn to circles, to drawing the lines together. But maybe we are no longer inside our own circles, the books, once they are written?

Thank you for this exchange.

xxxDamon

AUTHOR BIOS



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Jill Magi is an artist, writer, and critic working in text, image, and textile. She is the author of *Threads*, *Torchwood*, *SLOT*, *Cadastral Map*, *LABOR*, and a scholarly monograph on textimage hybridity, *Pageviews/Innervisions*. In the spring of 2015 Magi wrote weekly commentaries for *Jacket2* on "A textile poetics." Also in 2015 Magi curated two e-pamphlets for Essay Press, entitled *Labor Poetic Labor!* and *Labor Poetic Labor! 2: into the archive*. The NYU Abu Dhabi Project Space Gallery mounted a solo exhibition of Magi's visual work in 2015, and she teaches textiles, poetry, and art electives at NYUAD, where she joined the faculty in 2013.



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