

At a Distance

Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet

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The Form: 1970–1979 and Other Extemporaneous Anomalous Assemblings

Melody Sumner Carnahan

The idea sprang to life out of boredom: 1978, California, a cramped studio in Tan House Apartments at the edge of Palo Alto, a few hundred yards from the Bayshore Freeway. I had just returned from my first trip to Europe visiting the catacombs of culture in London, Paris, Rome, Madrid, Athens, and then Cuenca, Spain, where I decided to devote my life to the art of writing. I was patiently awaiting the news that Mr. Stegner wanted to give me his coveted Wallace E. Stegner Fellowship in Creative Writing at Stanford University. I was planning to be the next Ken Kesey.

I peppered my application with affirmations: “I hope that fiction, when relieved of the necessity to comment on life, may deliver us into a more immediate experiencing of it.” And “I want the words to have an inciting mental power, the heat of combination or generation . . . provoking direct sensory, sensual, and emotional activity, as music can do.” As it turned out, they weren’t much interested in words as dynamite. The not-exactly-form-letter rejecting my application called the work “too experimental.” Recently, a New York agent declined to represent my work, describing it in similar terms as “falling between the cracks of commercial, literary, and experimental.” She said, however, that she enjoyed “the apparent relishing of each phrase as it’s spat out!” Exactly. Which reminds me of the way George Saunders describes his favorite kind of writing: “The sentences are not merely sentences but compressed moments that burst when you read them.”¹

While waiting to hear from Mr. Stegner, I went to the Stanford campus everyday to write. I sat in courtyards, under trees, on benches, in hallways, observing. I wrote pieces there that have since made their way into books and live performance works, CD and DVD recordings, film scores, video and audio works, installations, and radio productions. I now consider that “my time at Stanford” was fruitful, and though the university didn’t acknowledge my presence, I learned what I needed to learn from it, and what I needed to work against.

One day, supine on the bed (there was only one chair), I heard, broadcast through the tiny clock radio, what turned out to be my future direction: words set to music in Robert Ashley’s opera *Perfect Lives*.² Ashley, I soon discovered, was the director of the Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College just across the Bay in Oakland. My husband, Michael Sumner, said, “Why don’t you apply to Mills as well . . . just in case this Stanford thing doesn’t work out?” I did, and was awarded a full-tuition scholarship and spent the next three and a half years in heaven working with composers and musicians,

making books, and receiving a master of fine arts degree in writing. My work was not only accepted, it was understood, though not so much in the literature department as in the “experimental” Book Arts Program, and at the “experimental” Center for Contemporary Music, where I studied with Ashley, Maggi Payne, Terry Riley, and Laetitia Sonami. I had found my tribe.³

Back to Palo Alto and the waiting . . . Tan House Apartments:

She was hoping to catch a glimpse of the person who had emitted the short half-shriek which hadn’t sounded like the noises made by the deaf woman next door when she tried to get her husband’s attention as he worked on his car, nor had it sounded like the noises made by the girl on their right whose boyfriend sometimes resorted to violence when she had hit him with a heavy skillet or thrown the contents of one of his drawers into the swimming pool.

This fairly autobiographical story I wrote at Tan House was later included in my first collection, *The Time Is Now*.⁴ We had few friends in town, contemporary culture was nonexistent in stodgy Palo Alto, and the inhabitants seemed like cockroaches: no sign of them until you weren’t looking and then they came out to do something—but what?

It is early summer, evening. A woman pulls out weeds from around the trees in her yard. A man comes out of the house, stands directly behind her in his shorts, black socks, a drink in his hand. She continues pulling weeds without looking up. He walks around, looking down, then kicks a rock off the cement drive. It skips, rolls, and lands in a pile of others that form part of the landscaping. He goes back inside.⁵

I got a job working part-time in the Education Department of the *Wall Street Journal* up on Page Mill Road. I rode my bike there three times a week and for fun at lunch hour lounged on the grounds of nearby SLAC, the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center, which to me was one of the power spots of the world. We didn’t have a television, and the pool (though a hit with the occasional out-of-town visitor, who had to sleep, literally, in the closet) was not my thing. One day I got an idea, again lying on the bed.

“Mike!” I said.

“Yes. . . .” My husband turned warily from the desk where he’d been fixing the roller on my Hermes portable . . . *ding // *ding // *ding.

“Can you make me a form? It would list the years 1970 through 1979, each year followed by a blank line. We’ll send it out to people and ask them to fill it in. I mean . . . it’s so vague, the whole decade. What was it about anyway?”

“H-m-m,” he said, not one to jump on board prematurely. Maybe this was just a passing whim (“She has a whim of steel.”), or maybe it would turn out to be fun like the “chance” walks we took tossing a coin at each corner to decide which way to go, invoking unknowns.

We were young, ambitious, reckless, and, as I say, bored with suburban Palo Alto. The punk scene was just getting going in San Francisco, also New Wave theater, and New Music performances, but you didn’t see a sign of it in Palo Alto. We’d make pilgrimages to San Francisco clubs whenever our 1964 Ford Galaxy cooperated. What do you do night after night: listen to the neighbors fight, take long bike rides, eat another giant chocolate chip cookie? This blandness was not what I expected from California, having at seventeen traveled up Highway 1 to San Francisco with my wildest high school friend who insisted I get “experienced.”

A few months earlier, for fun, Mike and I had performed a guerilla art act late one night, anonymously plastering an 8½ by 11-inch Quick-Print poster all over the narcoleptic town: at traffic lights, on parking posts, phone poles, realtor’s signs, Stanford’s utility boxes, fences, walls, whatever flat surfaces we could find (using actual wheat paste or a staple gun). The poster was one simple icon, a black-on-white silhouette of Edouard Manet’s famous “fifer” (figure 10.1). This was Mike’s idea. He’d been excited by the walls of weathered posters in European cities. After we’d made the anonymous postings, we’d check out if and how people reacted: they had penciled in words, spray-painted over it, or tried to peel off the harmless, enigmatic image. Why? Someone wrote a letter to the editor at the Stanford paper, asking, “What is it all about?” No one knew. How strange. This was totally interesting to us.

Now we knew firsthand how a benign unexpected action could elicit a response among people who are adjusted to sameness.

“How to make the stupidity of everyday life a visible issue. . . . Everyday I feel I am being: A. cloned, B. knifed, C. embalmed,” from *Search and Destroy* magazine, San Francisco, 1978.

Mike proceeded to draw up “the form” using rubdown type, and he added lines at the bottom for signature and date. I handed it out to coworkers at



Figure 10.1 Manet's "fifer" posted in Palo Alto, California, 1978.

the *Wall Street Journal* and people I met around town, to relatives and friends, asking them to "fill it in and give it back to me." Mike then suggested we mail it out to artists, writers, politicians, people we admired, people we didn't know. He looked up addresses at the Stanford library. I typed up a letter to enclose with the blank form:

Dear So-and-So:

This is a form I am sending out to 100 people. I would like you to fill it in anyway you like then send it back. I will be very grateful if you do.

We had no idea, nor did those who received the form, what, if anything, would come of it. We were simply trying to keep the mailbox stuffed with oddball things to facilitate getting out of bed in the morning. The art, the poetry, the personal revelations and honest explanations began pouring in. We enjoyed noticing how the paper had been touched, cut, smudged, re-folded, collaged, or drawn upon. The tenor of the handwriting, what kind of pens or pencils had been used. The boldness, the shyness exposed; fanatically neat people whose practiced words fit perfectly; messy ones who had no loyalty to the lines often spilling over onto the back of the form; the ones holding back, the ones letting go. . . . Objects were sometimes attached to the form: feathers, photographs, a complete set of hand-tied flies in one instance.

Many responses were straightforward and heartbreaking in their sincerity. Deaths, operations, marriages, breakups were the signposts for some. Others were completely political in approach: "Nixon's visit to China." A curious poetry came out of normally quiet, unassuming teachers and businessmen. Visual artists, too, often used words evocatively, whereas published writers were more reticent, perhaps not wanting to give their words away (figure 10.2).

I was moved by my parents' responses. My father's prediction for 1979, "World War III or Depression," and my mother's hopeful "looking forward to fun in van," which seemed to quintessentialize their personality differences.

There is a precedent for this kind of thing in my life: I launched an unending salvo of questions as soon as I could talk. Much later I began "interviewing" informally. I'd come up with a question and write down the responses from various people; I surveyed people in bars, at conferences, trying to catch them off guard: "Would you rather be wrong or boring?" or "What is the source of your beauty?" or "What do you want that you are not getting now?" . . . often the words love or affection came up. Once I made fortune cookies for a friend's birthday party, inserting sentences from my stories. When I asked people what the "fortunes" meant to them, I was surprised how they had made immediate and meaningful associations, similar to the anomalous truths that erupt from the *I Ching* when it is consulted sincerely.

In terms of influences: For several years Mike had been studying the work and ideas of John Cage, beginning with Richard Kostelanetz's documentary monograph on Cage. That book literally fell into his hands at the university

Figure 10.2 Forms filled out by Richard Elmore, Lark Drummonds [Brandt], Pete McKloskey, and Mollie Favour-Miller, 1978–1979.

[illegible]

I ENJOYED THIS EXERCISE. PLEASE TREAT IT AS SOMETHING VERY PERSONAL.

1970 - 1979 = - 9

C 1970 Cambridge, Brahman's occurrence; Cold water, River Shores;
Washington, D.C.; last letter August 1968 Boston, Connecticut;
aka: 20 names

B 1971 Spain along, Hal, Carl's number, Howard from Paris, Cold water,
going along the Charles, Tony Adams, (Burr, dope, Rabbit,

A 1972 Hal, Chris Colorado, Hank & Bar, San Francisco, Lester,
painting, Rabbit, Tony Adams the rug weaving

A+ 1973 spelling, pencil, (Pencil, Peppy, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil,
etching, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil,

B 1974 Contra, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil,
etching, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil,

A 1975 etching, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil,
etching, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil, (Pencil,

etk 1976 downhill } # etching

etk 1977 This is a very useful form - I have been
using it ever since I got it This form

1978 A+ gets a GOOD

1979 "Every cloud has a silver lining" USEFUL FORM #113

1974.5 174.5 X 10 = 1974.5

SIGNATURE Zack Drummonds

DATE 12/4/78

PS - Did bet you never imagined you'd get this
back -

House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

MEMORANDUM

DEAR MELODY:

~~DATE~~ IS UNAVAILABLE
TO COMPLETE THIS
FORM. IF YOU WOULD
LIKE, I COULD HAVE
ONE OF THE STAFF
COMPLETE IT.

REGARDS,

JOHN KOTLER

1979

SIGNATURE

DATE _____

1970 - 1979

1970	117 lbs
1971	110 lbs
1972	115 lbs
1973	120 lbs
1974	122 lbs
1975	115 lbs
1976	118 lbs
1977	132 lbs
1978	122 lbs
1979	120 lbs

SIGNATURE W. L. Brown - Miller

DATE Dec! 22, 1979

bookstore in Fort Collins, Colorado, in 1971.⁶ By 1978 we had probably heard of Kostelanetz's *Assemblings*, though we hadn't actually seen one. His "assembling" concept was both practical and brilliant. Beginning in the fall of 1972, artists were invited to submit one thousand copies each of an 8½-by 11-inch work (one to four pages completed in any medium that could be reproduced). With no editorial judgment on the part of the editors, the volume would be assembled and bound, thereby circumventing one of a publisher's greatest hurdles—raising the capital for printing costs.⁷

We sent Kostelanetz a form to fill out, which he did, as did Andy Warhol, John Cage, Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari, Ruby Ray, Dick Higgins, Throbbing Gristle, Vito Acconci, and many other admired artists (figure 10.3).

At the same time, mail art was circling the globe. In 1978 we were ignorant of this grassroots venue for art. However, soon after receiving a significant number of completed forms, we were introduced to an "underground" printer/publisher from Union City across the Bay: The Fault Press, named after the fault line that ran through its building.

A partner in the press, Rustie Cook, leafing through a few of the forms we brought to her Thanksgiving dinner, said instantly: "This should be a book." We hadn't thought of that. So far, no one who had filled out a form knew what, if anything, would ever be done with it. And each had no idea what anyone else had done with her or his form, so, for any one person, the moment of confronting the page was pure. The people who completed their forms did so for themselves and kindly sent them back to us as requested. I know now that people will do most anything if you ask them politely, and they seem to feel particularly responsible when filling out a form.

After showing some completed forms to a couple of artists who were visiting, they asked to be part of it. I reluctantly said yes and later regretted it. People who had seen other completed forms approached the page in a self-consciously "arty" manner, trying too hard to be weird, to be unique. Their forms were ultimately not included. The rule stuck: No one who had seen any other completed form could fill out a form. It had to be a fresh experience. The one hundred forms in the book are all from people who had no idea what it was for, or what others had done.

At this point we were initiated into the broader mail art world through Rustie and her Fault Press partner Terrence McMahon (pseudonym Ian Teuty). They had been publishing found and visual poetry, collage assemblages, and twisted fictions in their chapbooks and later punk/Dada publi-

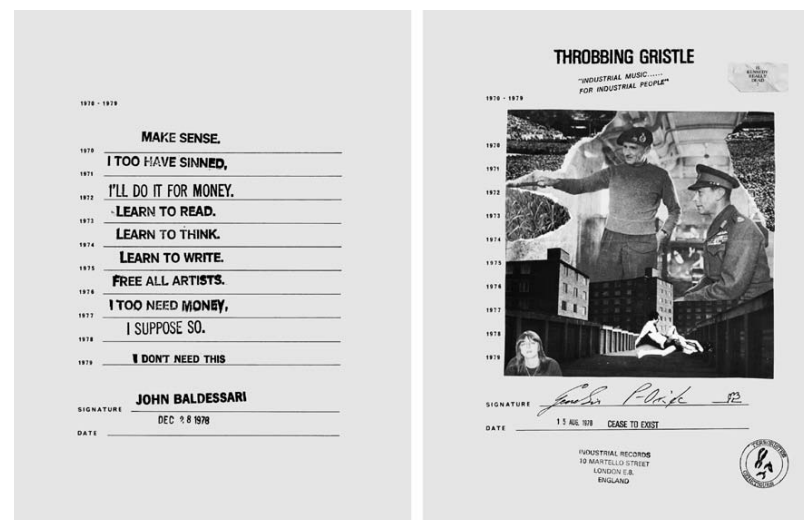


Figure 10.3 Forms filled out by John Baldessari and Genesis P-Orridge, 1978.

cations since 1971. They had recently produced a radical send-up of the ever popular *TV Guide*. For their tenth anniversary, they produced a publication, *The Casual Abuse Issue*, which included a seven-inch, 33⅓ rpm flexi-disk recording from Evatone soundsheets, featuring a punk song titled "Love's Alright," by Fresh. The cover of each copy was an original; and my story "Dear Male Friend" was published in its entirety, along with the words and images of two hundred other contributors from around the world. In the tradition of the times, artists were invited to be part of the publication and the exhibition, and whatever they sent in was mulched into the mix, printed and bound, and the originals were hung on the walls for the party.⁸

Once at Mills, having happily moved out of Palo Alto and on to Lake Shore Avenue in Oakland, I signed up for Kathy Walkup's book arts seminar, "What Is a Book?" From handmade-paper letterpress broadsides to books bound in shower caps, materials and media came together to explore what communication is about and how material forms can bend to lend wider scope to what is said.

The summer before I started at Mills, Rustie Cook and I began printing the book *The Form: 1970–1979* at the Fault Press shop, reproducing the forms people had filled out. Arduous. My first hands-on book production experience. I hadn't imagined the labor and attention required to get the

simplest type and image onto a printed page. These were predesktop computer days, so photographic negatives had to be shot in camera and plates were burned, ink was poured, and the A.B. Dick offset presses churned. The two of us hand-collated the thing: 250 copies of 103 pages spread out around the room. A circumambulative marathon. The whole process took months longer than we had imagined, but when it was done, the Mills College Art Gallery decided that *The Form* originals should be displayed behind glass, so it hosted an exhibition, in March 1980, and the books were available, printed and bound just in time.

This was the first publication from our imprint. The name was born as Mike and I were driving across Nevada in the old Ford Galaxy, the windows rolled down, the heat pushing a hundred, Mike at the wheel, my bare feet up on the dash. Perspiring steadily, I said, "We need a name for our press."

He thought about it for a mile and answered, "How about Burning Books?"

The Form was included in several artists book shows, won a Purchase Award from the Art Institute of Chicago, and the contributors all got copies. It's been out of print since then, and we have just this year gotten around to reprinting it. It still grabs people, even those born after 1979. A novel on each page.

The iconoclastic mind-set of the late seventies/early eighties was anti-establishment to the core, and though it shared some ideological principles with the sixties, the aesthetic was diametrically opposed. Though the do-it-yourself West Coast punk/New Wave movement was keen on the avant-garde art movements Dada and surrealism of the 1910s and 1920s, nihilism, futurism, and existentialism also fueled it. With an almost religious faith in the regenerative powers of chaos, it was a more "positive" version of the London thing, uniquely California grown ("California über alles"). Music, theater, and performance pieces were being created by people who hadn't been trained but got up on stage anyway and used power tools and screams, put their bodies at risk, to extend, bend, or contort the moment at events promoted by word of mouth or cheaply printed flyers, similar to the raves of more recent years.⁹ On both sides of the Bay, we'd found thriving scenes expanding and cross-fertilizing exponentially, saying in boldface type "make it, break it, take it, fake it, infiltrate it, *but do something different*." Billboard alteration was becoming a new sport, anti-everything corporate in a proactive, tongue-in-cheek way—"terminal fun," to quote the Mutants. Unspoken was the assertion that you don't need the approval of the East Coast

establishment, big L.A. record companies, or grant support from the National Endowment for the Arts to light your fire. *Alere flammam*, "to feed the flame," became the Burning Books motto.

I hosted a four-hour radio program on San Francisco's KPFA for which I had solicited original versions of "Star Dust," written by Hoagy Carmichael in 1929, the most recorded song in history. Home-taped versions from librarians and computer programmers, amateur pianists and toy organ players, electronic-music composers and opera singers were aired alongside recordings by Sarah Vaughan, Willie Nelson, and Hoagy himself. John Bischoff re-recorded his piece inside a tunnel while swinging the microphone around his head. Every version I could get my hands on was played—"waste art, want art."

Around that same time, "New Music bumped into new music."¹⁰ In 1982, composer/performer Barbara Golden (a fellow Mills grad) and I went into serious debt to independently produce a three-night festival of M.U.S.I.C.: Marvelous Unlimited Sounds in Concert. Barbara had earlier presented her thesis concert at Mills, "Home Cooking," which included cameos by other composers and performers, a lot of singing, drinking, listening, and eating, with Barbara as avant-chanteuse and demimondaine. This led to my idea that Barbara should host a New Music/New Wave television program, which evolved or devolved into the concept of a live, three-night extravaganza. We at first had some enthusiastic local backers, but at the last minute they backed out. We'll never do it again, but at least we did it right, and no one died.

M.U.S.I.C. performers ranged from Lou Harrison to Arto Lindsay of DNA, Joan La Barbara to "The Voice of L," Esmerelda, George Lewis, "Blue" Gene Tyranny, and John Giorno, ten to twelve acts per night. Many people donated their time or got paid almost nothing. Composers Maggi Payne and Jay Cloidt performed and also engineered. We found a space in San Francisco, the slightly seedy bordello-flavored theater On Broadway, directly above (and run by the same guy) the infamous punk venue the Mabuhay.

M.U.S.I.C. brought together wildly divergent trends in music and performance. During one of the quietest pieces on Saturday night, a shamanic invocation by Sam Ashley, the heavy-metal band in the venue below was heard much more clearly than Sam. He didn't seem to mind. It was the perfect moment for practicing what John Cage had taught us: Everything is music.

Mike screened his *Throbbing Gristle* film made at the band's Kezar Stadium appearance in 1981. He designed the poster for M.U.S.I.C., and numerous

posters, logos, and cassette/CD covers since for our composer/musician friends, many of whom started their own labels, such as Artifact Recordings, Rastascan Records, and Frog Peak Music.

Everybody could produce and be an event, in the spirit of the happenings of the sixties. An art event was not just a polite white-wine, dress-fine affair, but a passage into a nonordinary sphere. We all had to get out there and do something. As a writer, I was asked to give readings. One time I decided to lip-synch, wearing a bathing cap and graduation gown, to recordings of others reading my words. This was termed “performance poetry,” which was fine with me. The next time I led the audience in a “sing-along-with-the-bouncing-ball” piece. Using a slide projector and light pen, the words from Allen Ginsberg’s poem “Howl” were sung to the tune of the “Sound of Music” (*I saw . . . the best minds . . . of my gen-er-a-tion. . .*) Finally, having realized my voice was never going to cut the cake or the mustard, I asked musician and composer friends to take my stories and “do anything they wanted with them.” They did, and to my delight have continued to do so for the past eighteen years.¹¹

My personal initiation to a type of meeting “at a distance” took place in junior high school back in Denver, Colorado. One day my sister and I found out about “the teen line.” It was a sort of primitive chat room. You would dial up a certain always-busy number, and then, in between the busy signal buzzes, you would shout out *buzz*—“Hello!”—*buzz* and some young guy would answer, “Hi!—*buzz*—“What’s”—*buzz*—“your”—*buzz*—“name?”—*buzz*. You would tell him your name if you liked his voice, and then he would tell you his. You or he or she would give a phone number (laboriously, one number at a time), which often started a stream of unexpected things, such as meetings at the shopping center or the A&W on Colorado Boulevard. Anybody who called up at any given moment was given equal chance to meet in the same “virtual space,” a step beyond the “personals” in a newspaper.

Speaking of phones, “answering machines” functioned as venues for randomly accessible creative expression when they first came out. John Giorno, in 1968, created his New York City Bowery-based *Dial-a-Poem*, which innovated the use of the telephone for mass communications, initiating the Dial-a-Something industry, from Dial-a-Joke to 900-phone-sex numbers.

Patrick Sumner, as part of Burning Books’ By-Products, hosted an unusual answering-machine “site” in 1983–1984. Patrick advertised his site with a series of twelve postcards showing an image and phone number only,

which were mailed out, posted, and printed in magazines. Each week a short, specially commissioned audio work could be accessed free; all you had to do was ring up the number and listen. Patrick asked a dozen of us to contribute audio works, including Jon Livingston’s *Streetwalker*, Michael Peppe’s *Phoney*, and the serialized drama *Three Shots in the Night* by Sheila Davies.

It takes nerve to give. It takes trust to put stuff out there not knowing what will come from it. I’m grateful to the people who filled out those forms for me. Ego let-go and copyright out the window. Or as Woody Vasulka says (quoting Phil Morton), “Copy it right!” Steina is the one who told me, “It’s not about who did it first, it’s about who did it best.” It’s about playing around and seeing what happens. No ideologies, no preconceptions. Stirring it up to allow something new to form.¹²

Book artist and typographer Kathleen Burch joined Burning Books after Mike and I had published *The Form* and two letterpress chapbooks. I met Kathleen in Kathy Walkup’s book arts classes at Mills. We three have collaborated for many years intermittently, and each of us has produced works on our own. Our first project together was the *Violence Poster* (1981), which featured, along with a graphic image of gangster Bugsy Siegal after he’d been shot in the face, a series of possible actions one might take in response to violence. The poster was prompted by our need to respond to the murder of John Lennon in December 1980. Friends and fellow students helped us put it up around the Berkeley/Oakland area.

The poster engendered antipathy, confusion, praise, inspiration, and finally a reprinting, paid for by Serendipity Books of Berkeley, which had displayed the poster in its windows and got requests for it from Canada and England. Soon after *The Time Is Now* was printed, Kathleen and poet Theresa Whitehill and I “advertised” the book by reciting in unison its 128-word “long title” in elevators, on BART (the Bay Area Rapid Transit) and in bars and cafes on Market Street and Telegraph Avenue.

Several books later . . . 1986: Burning Books, with a lot of support (i.e., personal debt and volunteer labor), produced *The guests go in to supper*, a 384-page anthology featuring the texts, scores, and ideas of seven living American composers who use words in their music: John Cage, Robert Ashley, Yoko Ono, Laurie Anderson, Charles Amirkhonian, Michael Peppe, and K. Atchley. When I called John Cage asking him to be part of the book, he said, “Fine. I have an 8-page manuscript or a 64-page one. Which do you prefer?” We asked for the big one. Later, as we were consulting him about



Figure 10.4 Melody Sumner Carnahan interviewing John Cage for *The guests go in to supper* (Burning Books), New York City, 1985.

some typesetting difficulties, he said, anecdotally, that the Museum of Modern Art had called the day after we did and wanted to publish that same sixty-four-page work, *MUSHROOMS et Variations*. He told them he had already promised it to us (figure 10.4). Later, he helped us get Yoko Ono to agree to be involved after she had initially said no. She had been his friend for many years; she introduced him to macrobiotics when his rheumatoid arthritis had just about done him in. When we were interviewing her for the book, at the Dakota in New York City, she described how he had persuaded her: They were having dinner, she had just raised the fork to her lips, when he explained that she might want to reconsider being involved in the project. She couldn't say no to him. When we finally got around to paying Cage the first installment of the tiny royalty we had promised him, he sent the check back, with a note saying, "I'm glad you do what you do."

We realized quite early that we probably wouldn't make a living from writing, art, or Burning Books, so we've always had jobs of various kinds. Kathleen, who has worked as a typographer and designer, cofounded the San Francisco Center for the Book in the early 1990s. Mike and I moved to New Mexico in 1989 and have continued making books: In addition to collabo-

rations with composers and performers, I get paid as a writer and editor, and Mike works as a designer for art publishers and art museums. Mike and I have continued producing Burning Books, often with a copublisher, such as *Helen Keller or Arakawa* by Madeline Gins, published with New York's East-West Cultural Studies.

Lately, as Burning Books, we have returned to posters; pamphlets; small inexpensive saddle-stitched books; and comics-style publications. These are cheaply printed on a web press or laser printer, mostly given out free or for an absurdly small price (10 cents) with the Web address at the bottom (burningbooks.org). Recently, Mike initiated the Salvo Series of Educational Pamphlets, with titles like "Shopping for War." Some of the work has made its way into museum installations and Santa Fe's ongoing Window Project, the creation of artist/curator Guy Ambrosino, where artists are given a commercial storefront window to fill for a month. It's a great way to get things out into the world. Things given freely find their way into the hands of those who appreciate them.

Write or create only to please yourself, and please yourself completely. And in so doing, please a few others completely too. Each one may go out the door and become your messenger. But if you try to please everybody, you end up pleasing no one completely. And you have no messengers.

—Gertrude Stein, quoted in "Who or What Is Burning Books?" 1991

Notes

1. The quote is from George Saunders, writing about his influences in "Johnny Tremain" (*New Yorker*, January 1, 2001), 125.
2. Episodes of Robert Ashley's *Perfect Lives* were originally released in 1978 on Lovely Music Ltd. (generally referred to as the "yellow record"), with Ashley speaking the words. Later, Lovely released the entire opera on CD and videotape as "opera for television," and it premiered on Great Britain's Channel Four Television in 1984. Burning Books produced the book, *Perfect Lives* (San Francisco: Burning Books, 1991), including the entire libretto and an in-depth interview with Ashley in which he explains how he makes his art. John Cage is quoted on the back cover: "What about the Bible? And the Koran? It doesn't matter: We have *Perfect Lives*."

3. "What seems to be emerging in 'creative writing' is an academicism based on long-passed models. By completely denying any interest in experiment, or the infusion of avant-garde concerns, creative writing cuts itself (and its students) off from the evolution of Literature." Richard Kostelanetz, "Creative Writing," *Interface Journal* 5 (Spring 1978): 21–22.

4. The original edition of *The Time Is Now* (Oakland, Calif.: Burning Books, 1982) includes eleven of my stories (as Melody Sumner) with tab dividers, spiral binding, and a glossary and index. The book was codesigned with Kathleen Burch (illustrations by Michael Sumner) to encourage rereading and cross-referencing. I handed it out to friends, and one friend passed it along to his friend, C. Carr, a reviewer at the *Village Voice* in New York City. She wrote about the book in a *Voice Literary Supplement* cover feature, calling it "a fast ride with the top down" ("Fractured Feary Tales," *Voice Literary Supplement*, November 1984). The book sold out quickly, and Burning Books reprinted it in 1985. Both early editions are out of print, but the expanded edition with composer collaborations on compact disc was released in 1998 (Lebanon, N.H., and Santa Fe: Frog Peak Music and Burning Books), 47.

5. This excerpt is from a limited edition, letterpress version of *Gravity*, which I hand-printed at Mills College (Oakland, Calif.: Burning Books, 1980, 8). The story was later incorporated into my *13 Stories* (Santa Fe: Burning Books, 1995), 80.

6. From a recent conversation with Michael Sumner (Santa Fe, September 7, 2002):

I came across the book *John Cage*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz [New York: Praeger, 1968], and was excited that Cage's ideas were applicable to any art medium, not just music. Anything he mentioned was something to pursue. He talks about Gertrude Stein, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff. He had worked with Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg and, as a visual artist, I was already interested in them. After reading what he had to say about his own work and other events of that period I wanted to know everything.

In 1971, the Contemporary Art History class only brought me up to 1945 and I was more interested in what happened in the next twenty-five years. That monograph on Cage, and his other books, particularly *Silence* and *A Year from Monday*, were for me like clunky hypertext. They set up my mental browser so that when I was "surfing" in bookstores or record shops these key names were highlighted and I pursued them.

Recordings were harder to find than books, but I did purchase *Variations IV* [Cage with David Tudor] in a drugstore selection of discounted records. It was a to-

tal surprise. It cost me fifty cents. Ironically, Cage wrote somewhere that he wasn't interested in recordings and particularly didn't like *that* recording because it was part of a live performance in Los Angeles that went on nonstop for four hours but the recording only included short excerpts. I didn't care if Cage didn't like it and my friends didn't like it, it was incredible for me. A friend of mine in Aspen, Colorado, came across Cage's *Indeterminacy* and gave it to me. I treasure that record.

I also ran across a book about EAT [experiments in art and technology] from the 1970 World's Fair in Osaka, Japan. Here was other evidence of what was happening in technology-based art and experimental performance and the collaboration between visual art, music, dance, and writing. Gradually I started finding more recordings of contemporary composers, including Robert Ashley, Pauline Oliveros, Iannis Xenakis, Alvin Lucier, Joan La Barbara, Morton Subotnick. By searching out the skimpy record bins labeled "electronic" or "twentieth century" or "avant-garde" and taking whatever was there, I became educated.

7. About Kostelanetz's *Assemblings*: "The conveners of this embittered harvest are Richard Kostelanetz, Henry Korn, and Mike Metz, and they have gone about it in an ingenious way, since their contributors were made to supply not, as is conventional, the potential contents of an anthology but its actual contents: '1,000 copies of up to four 8 1/2 in. by 11 in. pages of anything they wanted to include printed at their own expense.' Which leaves the editors, who say they accepted everything they were sent, with nothing more arduous to arrange than the binding of the volume. Straight publishers too might like to try this labor-saving method out on their most adventurous clients; not only would it work out very much cheaper, but provide an extra thrill, too, for the eventual reader, who could enjoy his hero's text exactly as he himself had prepared it for the Xerox machine; immediacy would hardly go farther." (*Times Literary Supplement*, January 21, 1972).

8. "This collection is not a documentation of the Fault's Punk/Dada Mail Art exhibition. It is intended as a collage, or rather a fragment, from the combined efforts of all the participants and friends listed on the contributor's page. DO NOT HOLD THE FAULT ACCOUNTABLE. The distortion and calculated misuse of individual work is the result of my own casual and abusive attitude towards art. Three hundred copies of the issue were printed & assembled during April & May by Terrence McMahon. All attempts to buy or get 'extra' copies will be ignored and any contributor caught trying to sell their copy will be held in contempt. The remaining copies will be distributed free to pedestrians at the Fault's tenth anniversary party. At the party, all the original works will be displayed to the public for a minimum of three hours. Eternally yours, Ian Teuty." From the editorial page of *The Casual Abuse Issue*

(Hayward, Calif.: Fault Press, 1981), one issue of the Fault Publications which took many forms.

9. "Here's a good example of how punk cuts both ways, one thrust reveling in the lifestyle afforded by the dollar Empire, the other rejecting imperialism out of hand. This ambivalence is dynamic; is something battling for our souls? Nostalgia for life among lawn furniture and holidays in the sun, vs. rage at militarist adventures abroad and well-policed conformity at home." Comment from Peter Belsito, Bob Davis, Marian Kester, about a Tuxedo Moon poster, in *STREETART: The Punk Poster in San Francisco, 1977–1981* (Berkeley: Last Gasp, 1981), 124.

10. Charles Shere, "New Music Bumps into New Music," *The Oakland Tribune* (November 28, 1982), H6.

11. "I didn't like the sound of my voice and my first story collection had just been published. Most of my friends were musicians, composers, and performers. One day I got the idea to have THEM put the words to music, so I could avoid having to do readings myself. I handed the book around, saying, 'Do something with the words, any way you like.' To my surprise, they did. And in ways I couldn't have imagined." Introduction to book/CD compilation of *The Time Is Now* (Lebanon, N.H., and Santa Fe: Frog Peak Music and Burning Books, 1998), 2.

12. "Guard the mysteries! Constantly reveal them!" San Francisco poet Lew Welch quoted in Kathleen Burch, *Indicia* (an interactive book and card game) (San Francisco: Burning Books, 1990), 43.