

No Real Assurances: Late Modernist Poetics and George Schneeman's Collaborations with the New York School Poets

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Abstract: Painter George Schneeman's collaborations with the New York School poets represent an under-examined, vast body of visual-textual hybrids that resolve challenges to mid-and-late century American art through an indirect alliance with late modernist literary practices. Schneeman worked with New York poets intermittently from 1966 into the early 2000s. This article examines these collagist works from a formalist perspective, uncovering how they incorporate gestural techniques of abstract art and the poetic use of juxtaposition, vortices, analogies, and pictorial and lexical imagism to generate non-representational, enigmatic assemblages. I argue that these late modernist works represent an authentically experimental form, violating boundaries between art and writing, disrupting the venerated concept of single authorship, and resisting the demands of the marketplace by affirming for their creators a unity between art-making and daily life—ambitions that have underpinned every twentieth century avant-garde movement.

On first seeing George Schneeman's painting in the 1960s, poet Alice Notley asked herself, "Is this [art] new? Or old fashioned?"¹ Notley was probably reacting to Schneeman's unassuming, intimate representations of Tuscan landscape and what she called their "privacy of relationship." The potential newness Notley detected in Schneeman's "old-fashioned" art might be explained by how his small-scale and quiet paintings share none of the self-conscious flamboyance in much American painting of the 1960s and 1970s.

Schneeman's vanguard status, from solo projects to collaborative work, derives from a self-effacing aesthetic and from a conscious engagement with innovations in twentieth century poetics around interrelationships between poetry and painting. Of particular interest in this latter regard are Schneeman's extensive creative partnerships with the so-called "second generation" of the "New York School" poets. Schneeman and the poets collaborated on collages, drawings, paintings and assemblages, the high watermark of which fell between 1966 and 1972 (Schneeman). Over the last thirty-five years, these works had been exhibited intermittently. However, more recently the collaborations have been exhibited in leading New York galleries, such as Tibor de Nagy (2004) and prominent cultural venues such as Poet's House (2014). These retrospectives have occasioned overdue critical attention to them, indicating that these collaborations are being taken seriously as an overlooked chapter in the complicated extensions and evolutions of modernism in the postwar New York City art scene.

¹ Alice Notley's comments were made at a forum celebrating the opening of an exhibition called "A Painter and His Poets: The Collaborative Art of George Schneeman," at Poet's House, New York City, April 26, 2014.

Although the pictographic content of Schneeman's collaborations with poets tends to predominate over their written and typographical features, their combined pictorial and lexical content and their abstract surfaces link them to certain visual poetics that developed in the wake of European modernism, particularly in American poets such as Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. By gravitating toward contemporary poets as well as to earlier poetic models, Schneeman's hybrid collaborations circumvent an enormous challenge faced by New York-based visual artists in the late 1960s -- namely how a market-driven hunger for newness in form and expression had turned avant-gardism into an institutionalized orthodoxy. How could a serious artist interested in radically original forms of expression create authentically vanguard work when a well-financed, authoritative art establishment assimilates and makes commodities of "experimental" art?

In 1968, reflecting on this mainstream absorption of the once politically charged concept of the outsider or "avant-garde," artist, poet and art critic John Ashbery provocatively, if provisionally, characterized a traditional artist (such as Schneeman) as the greater risk-taker and institutional outlier. "It might be argued," Ashbery writes, "that [in 1968] traditional art is even riskier than experimental art; that it offers no real assurances to its acolytes, and since traditions are always going out of fashion, it is more dangerous and therefore more worthwhile than experimental art" (240).

So how did an American artist invested in traditional Italian painting come to work and live in a post-Andy Warhol New York City art scene, and from that very locale, evolve into a largely unknown vanguard figure, making hybrid poetic-visual works that involving collective authorship with poets?

George Schneeman was born in Saint Paul, Minnesota, in 1934. After studying philosophy and English literature in the United States, he served in the US Army in Italy in the late 1950s and stayed on living there afterwards, adapting to the rural Tuscan lifestyle and scratching out a living teaching art and English. He wrote mostly unpublished poetry, influenced by "Dante and Franco Sacchetti, Ezra Pound, Guiseppe Ungaretti, and [the first generation New York School poets] Edwin Denby and James Schuyler" (Berkson 6). Schneeman's primary vocation was painting, and he eventually took up fresco and egg tempera, following the practices of past Sieneese masters like the Lorenzetti brothers, Sassetta, and Giovanni di Paolo. However literary interests remained strong. In 1966, he chose to relocate his growing family from rural Italy to New York City. There he joined a community of poets who gathered at literary locales like The Poetry Project based in Saint Marks Church on Manhattan's Lower East Side. ²

² Throughout his life and career, Schneeman frequently returned to Italy where he worked on his art even while residing mainly in New York City.

While scholarly and critical attention has been paid to Schneeman's collaborations in the wake of their recent exhibitions, discussions focus primarily on the socio-cultural implications of the work. This focus is understandable. The works are anomalous, visual-textual hybrids, violating generic and media boundaries and undermining the market-friendly construct of the single author.

Yet the tentativeness in interpreting Schneeman's collaborations on formal and aesthetic grounds is caused by several other mitigating factors. Firstly many of the works tend toward levity and even whimsy, traits which threaten the high-minded gaze of art critics. Secondly, a long academic prejudice about collaborative art or poetry as "minor," is reiterated even by scholars who look quite favorably on these productions by Schneeman and the poets (Quilter). And Schneeman's collaborations tend to be subsumed into a larger, often shallow narrative around postwar New York City-based poet-painter collaborations, such as the famous *Stones* series by poet Frank O'Hara and painter Larry Rivers from 1957-59, and painter-writer Joe Brainard's many collaborations with his fellow New York School poets from the 1960s and 1970s (Yau; Ratcliff; Quilter). Even in comments by the participating poets and Schneeman, the collaborations are discussed as products of "utopian" ideals, value systems that seem to operate outside the actual works, but values that nevertheless defined an anti-establishment social politics shared by artists and poets in a tightly knit enclave centered on Manhattan's Lower East Side (Schneeman; Yau; Scheldfahl; Quilter). In this vein, the collaborations lay bare what Bill Berkson has called the neglected interpersonal dimensions of art-making as "as a form of social behavior" and art itself as an exercise in ethics (Berkson).

I propose to reexamine these collaborations for their formal properties, from the perspective of aesthetics and through the prism of how they connect late modernism. As I will demonstrate, such a discussion can augment a critical consideration of them as radical avant-gardism.

By the time Notley made her prescient observation about Schneeman's perplexingly new-yet-old aesthetic, the artist had already established his visual and poetic vocabulary in rural Italy, far from New York's experimental art movements. However, once in New York City, starting in 1966, he began making collaborative visual-poetic artworks with "at least fifteen" members of the so-called "second generation" of the New York School poets (Ratcliff 11), writers who were themselves partly influenced by their reading of poets from earlier literary movements like Symbolism, Imagism, Dada, and Surrealism.

Working with poets like Ron Padgett, Larry Fagin, Ted Berrigan, Bill Berkson, Dick Gallup, Maureen Owen, Alice Notely, Lewis Warsh and Anne Waldman, Schneeman created about four hundred collages, oil paintings, lithographs, egg tempera, portraits, drawings, posters, billboards, book jackets, postcards, and limited edition broadsides, magazines and books (Quilter 150). By the time they began to work with George Schneeman, the New York poets had each carved out quite

distinctive individual voices and styles, often through ironic first-person personae. By working with Schneeman, these poets' distinctive and often recognizable voices were somewhat tempered and mollified through the media and materials of the cooperative painting-and-writing process. In the collaborations, recognizable authorship by the poets was, to borrow a conceit coined by the antihero of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* almost "refined out of existence."

Varying in scale and function, each collaboration strives for spontaneity and immediacy in effect, combined with a refined deliberativeness and spare, collage-like arrangements of written words and visual content. The ample negative space and the lyrical inflections and warm-hearted humor set these hybrid works apart from the teeming, insistent bric-a-brac cacophonies characteristic of earlier European collage.

Though appropriated elements figure quite frequently, much of the collaborations' main content is both original and abstract. The works convey allusiveness through elegant fragmentation, discontinuous language and non-narrative, discordant imagery. Borrowed material varies, from reproductions of Renaissance art or illustrations to comics, pop and consumer advertisements and snippets from newspapers, magazines or books. Though operating partly in figurative and illustrative modes, visually speaking, these works involve abstract, semi-abstract, impressionistic and color field components. The overall dreamscape effect is enhanced by cryptic poetic expressions integrated into the composition. The collaborations' written components consist of typed, painted, sketched, or cut-and-pasted language in the form of imagistic aphorisms, lyrical effusions, metaphoric and analogical statements, compressed ekphrasis, and excerpted diary or travelogue. Many of the artworks' communal or public functions (especially at The Poetry Project based in Saint Marks Church on Manhattan's Lower East Side) are inseparable from their genealogies.³

Frequent Schneeman collaborator, poet Bill Berkson provided me with an account of their collaborative process and his account echoes the written and oral accounts provided in recent years by the painter's other poet-collaborators:

In the 1960s and early 70s, collaborating with George [Schneeman] was more chaotic (as in friendly chaos) than later. For the earlier works, the poet ... might even begin by drawing or pasting down an image, all sorts of materials — clippings from old magazines, various brushes and paints, Rapidograph pen, even a handy silkscreen apparatus... Words then got mixed into the general material rush. Spontaneous for me: no notes, very rarely any use of already written poems. [In] our later collaborations the materials were defined: ink and

³ I will return to this latter contextual function of Schneeman's collaborative works, as their originally ritualized and localized characteristics reflect radical, anti-consumerist politics about the nature and purposes of art-making.

gouache, or later, egg tempera, on big sheets of elegant drawing paper. I would draw some words in pencil, and George would make them bolder with his paint and add images (Berkson).

In this “spontaneous,” “general material rush,” illustrations and unassuming language mutate into indeterminate signifiers that seem to float from the base, or ground. Mimetic imagery or plain words are problematized by non-naturalistic shapes and coloring. This polysemous *mélange* is controlled through visual and literary counterpoint. A tone or mood suggested by one image or word-cluster is counterbalanced by an equally affecting contrasting feature. The attention of the viewer-reader oscillates fluently between and among the work’s spare miscellany.

A work that illustrates this multifarious, subtle formalism is the George Schneeman-Ron Padgett collaboration *Goat* (1969), a mixed-media composition on illustration board [see figure 1].

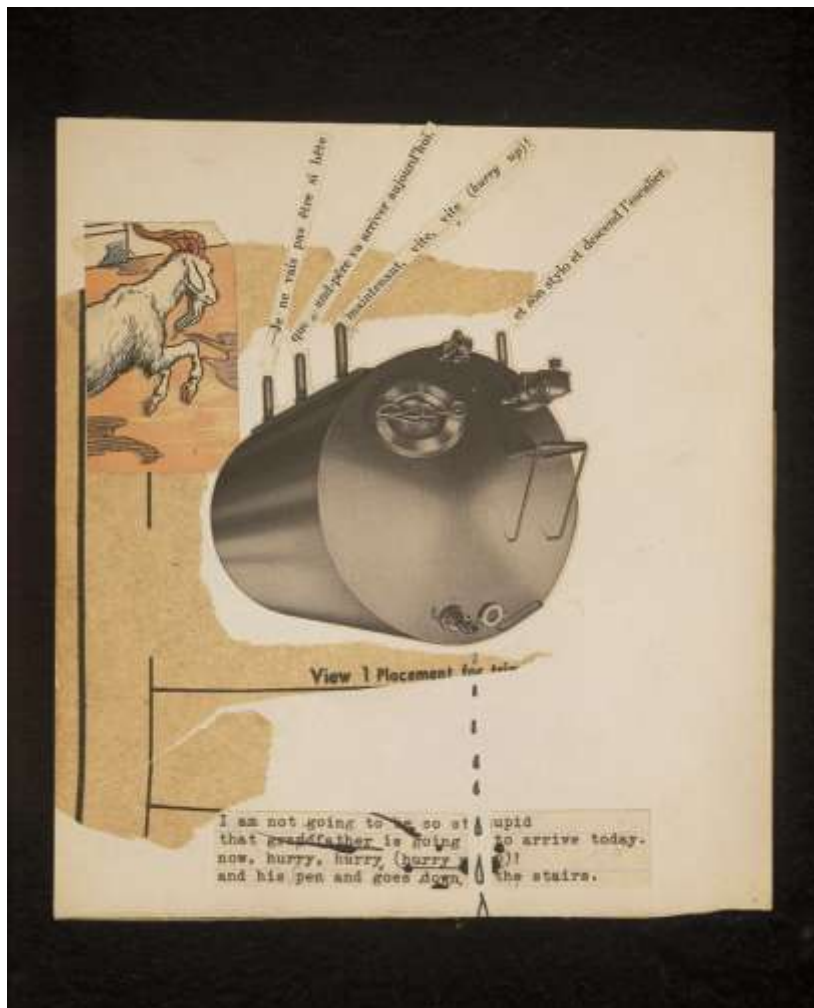


Figure 1. With Ron Padgett, *Goat*, 1969, mixed media on illustration board 7 3/8” x 6 3/4”
© George Schneeman Estate, Granary Books

It features a small, sumptuously illustrated cut-out image of a male goat in mid-leap, pasted on to brown pages that seem to have been torn from a machine-work’s instruction manual. The

centerpiece of the work is a cutout of a large black fuel storage tank. Semi-vertical lines of French narrative prose emerge from the tank's pipes. Detached from their original text these words are stripped of their discursive, informational and/or storytelling purposes. Instead of yielding a sequential meaning, the lines form a poem-collage akin to those of French Surrealist Andre Breton. In the bottom margin of *Goat* an inserted poem forms the French poem's English translation. The rearranged French language snippet undergoes two transformations. First its sequential function in a larger prose composition is disrupted when it is transposed by Schneeman and Padgett into the collage and then laid out into non-sense verse. Secondly the artfully constructed poem is translated into English in the bottom frame. The source material becomes a new poem twice.

This medley consisting of masculine goat, storage tank, instruction manual, surreal French and English prosody coalesces into an orderly, self-sufficient field with enough negative space to permit attention to move among the words and images without the disparate elements causing a sense of friction. The visual-textual content discloses meanings according to the reader-viewer's participatory role in "reading" the artwork itself. The significations seem simultaneously contemporary and mythic, erotic and innocuous, local and international, child-like and erudite. It is a multifocal configuration that Schneeman and his poet-collaborators follow in almost every collaboration.

The collaborations are also gestural, an aesthetic category defined in 1951 by artist and philosopher Robert Motherwell who was himself influenced by the literary examples of French poet Paul Valéry and Irish novelist James Joyce. In coining the term "School of New York," Motherwell characterizes the midcentury American modernist artwork not as a mimetic objective but as "an activity of bodily gesture serving to sharpen consciousness," and he proposes that the artist dispenses with representation to emphasize the materiality of the medium and the momentary facets of experience (Motherwell 154). These emphases ostensibly deliver the artist and the created object from the restrictions of representational art and from an anchored, or historical identification. Though Schneeman and the poets rejected such orthodoxies of the New York art scene's critics and thinkers, these gestural, individualizing criteria pinpointed by Motherwell are nevertheless quite recognizable in Schneeman's collaborations with the New York School poets, particularly in their centrifugal patterns and self-contained interplay -- what Carter Ratcliff calls their "ricochet" motions between and among their visual and textual connotations (21). The collaborative work suggests mobile, hypnotic interrelationships between the hieroglyph-like figures. Their contrapuntal presentation of text-and-image, draws the reader-viewer into seemingly endless possibilities for understanding and interpreting.

This mobility and mutability is strikingly demonstrated by a collaboration with poet Ted Berrigan called *You Don't Believe It*. A white page filled with dense, randomly cut-and-pasted

prose-poetry, apparently produced by Berrigan's typewriter, is overlain by randomly circled passages and frenzied action-painting style renditions of the poet's face, outlined in black magic marker. Berrigan's "real" appearance is concealed by thickly drawn eyeglasses, shaggy long hair and thick beard. Underlying typed words take the place of his actual skin. The poet's mouth is replaced with a cutout from a prose snippet (about Artic exploration) lifted from a book. This cutout mouth could be a sly nod to that same technique used in Willem de Kooning's famous *Women* series of paintings from the 1950s. De Kooning glued appropriated magazine images of womens' lips to the canvases and then painted the abstract woman around the stencil. To discern the figured poet Ted Berrigan within this anti-portrait, the viewer-reader must negotiate the frenetic combination of action-painting style scrawls and the reams of scrolling text. "Ted Berrigan," is relocated into the materiality of a hybrid visual-poetic art and becomes pure gesture [see figure 2]. Though it trades in caricature and humor, its intensities are high modernist -- form is content, content form.



Figure 2. With Ted Berrigan, *You Don't Believe It*, late 1970s, collage and ink on paper 12" x 9"
 © George Schneeman Estate, Granary Books

Similarly focused on materiality and gesture rather than on representational meanings or narratable sense, *You're 100 Miles Away* (1971), a Schneeman-Warsh collaboration, places three cutout images into an enigmatic relationship using original drawings, cutouts, a single poetic line and ample negative space.

A cutout photo featuring a blonde woman -- possibly from a 1930s or 1940s advertisement - - shows her holding a wire to her right ear and left temple. Schneeman has drawn elegant wire-like lines extending outward and downward from the woman's head, spilling into the blank spaces of the illustration board. One drawn cord extends into a cutout photograph of a medical instrument while the other curls downward, twinning over itself before its termination into a drawing of a hand-held receiver from an old telephone, out from which a drawing of a blank speech balloon seems to morph into a stamped postcard; the drawn card remains tantalizingly blank. On the right side of the board a colorful illustration of a densely overgrown meadow is overlain by painted circles resembling binocular lenses. That natural-manmade mélange floats above a grainy snapshot of a man, possibly Warsh or Schneeman. In between these two cutouts, "You're 1000 Miles" is written in painted wave-like block letters and cursive script, colored in blue and black. Gestural and abstract, evoking non-linear experiences of time and accentuating the artistic medium itself, collages like *You Don't Believe It* and *You're a 1000 Miles Away* are humorous, edgy and anarchical.

In addition to the gestural and abstract style, another important late modernist undercurrent that informs Schneeman's collaborations is the imagism and attenuated pictorial techniques of American poet Ezra Pound.

Pound's influence on the burgeoning postwar New York City poetry scene, and on Schneeman and his New York School poet-collaborators has been well-documented. Pound's controversial winning of the Bollingen Prize in 1949 and his well-publicized postwar extradition to the U.S. and infamous confinement in Saint Elizabeth's Hospital from in the 1940s and 1950s coincided with the developing Beat movement in poetry and the New York School scene. Scholar Daniel Kane contends that Pound's innovative poetics served as the preeminent twentieth century paradigm for the first and second generation New York School poets and that Pound, "took on a patriarchal and advisory role in the poetic community in New York," evidenced in the elder poet's correspondence with and mentorship of leading poet Paul Blackburn, one of the original founders of The Poetry Project (Kane 6-8). It was through The Poetry Project at Saint Marks Church that Schneeman embarked on his collaborative projects. Berkson and Schneeman met for the first time when they attended the Spoleto Festival in Italy in 1965, a cultural event at which Pound read from his late *Cantos* (Berkson 4; Diggory 330).

Pound's status as an iconoclastic American provocateur who sought to "make it new" mirrored the countercultural stance of the poets and painters in downtown Manhattan. Bill Berkson, Ron Padgett and Anne Waldman both separately report that Schneeman was a lifelong reader of Pound's *Pisan Cantos* (originally published in 1948), a text that gained in readership throughout the 1950s, when Schneeman was himself starting to write poetry in Italy. Schneeman and Padgett collaborated on playful homages to Ezra Pound, known as *The Story of Ezra Pound*, some of which featured phrases lifted from Pound's *Pisan Cantos* (Schneeman 56). As recently as 2012, Ron Padgett, Schneeman's most frequent collaborator, cites Pound's poems and translations from Provençal and Chinese as seminal influences in his development as a young poet.⁴

Though the lighthearted spirit of the New York School poets differs radically from Pound's reactionary views and fascist politics, the Schneeman-poet collaborations, like Pound's poetry, blend wry skepticism, dark humor, cultural allusions and stark fragmentation [see figure 3]. Pound's poems draw deeply on the visual arts and incorporate references to artworks so repeatedly that one could reasonably claim that he viewed visual artists as phantasmal collaborators.⁵

Like Pound's poetry, the Schneeman collaborations demonstrate an idiosyncratic openness to American vernacular speech, and Pound's poetry and Schneeman's collaborations with the New York poets draw on visual source material from the European past and the contemporaneous American scene.

Painting coincidentally as the poets' supply words, Schneeman and the New York poets seem to be late counterparts to Pound's technique which "translat[e] pictorial images into textual images [and through which], Pound is exercising his ability to present concreteness in his writing" (Kayton). And like Pound's poetry, Schneeman's collaborative work exploits the image-producing potential inherent in language and channels that pictographic potential into hallucinatory associations that cannot be paraphrased or explained in linear terms.

⁴ Ron Padgett's comments at the 2012 Poets Forum on "Poetic Beginnings: Beats, New York School & Language Poetry." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UE8BKWRzATo>

⁵ A partial list of poets references in Pound's poetry includes Duccio, Bellini, Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, Piero della Francesca, Burne-Jones, Swinburne, Whistler, Gaudier-Brzeska, Leger, and Picasso.

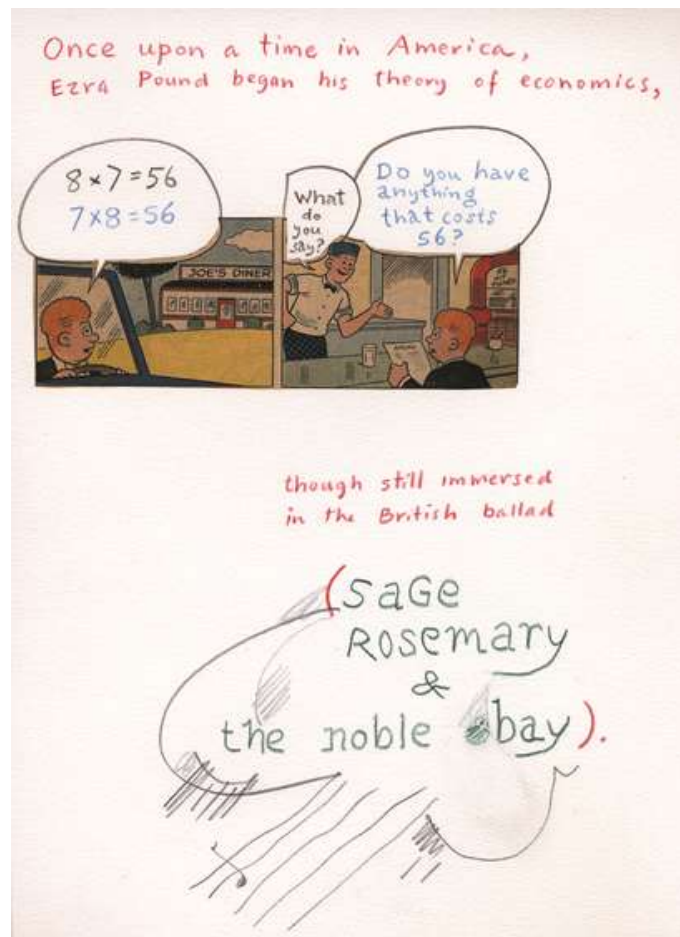


Figure 3. With Ron Padgett: Phil Fumble from *The Story of Ezra Pound*, 1998,
mixed media on paper 12 ½" x 9 ½"
© George Schneeman Estate, Granary Books

Pound's most accomplished short poems are two-to-four lines in length, centering on experiences of arresting visualization (c.f. "The New Cake of Soap," "Fan-Piece, For Her Imperial Lord," "In a Station at the Metro," "Shop Girl," "Alba," "Papyrus," "L'Art 1910,"). Schneeman's poet-collaborators utilize such spare verse as well, inserting two-to-four poetic lines into their compositions. Hugh Kenner, remarking on Pound's famous two-line Imagist poem (in which passengers on the subway evoke the image of "petals on a wet black bough") explains that the ghostlike presences of human faces evoked by Pound's arrangement of words "make a numinous claim on our attention" and that these become the motivating objective for Pound's poetics. Thus for Pound, Imagism in poetic practice "is energy, is effort. It [Imagism] does not appease itself by reproducing what is seen, but by setting some other seen thing into relation" (Kenner 186-187). Much the same could be said for Schneeman's collaborations which replace mimetic, discursive ends with objectivist enigmas built around pictures and words.

Furthermore, the careful placement of pictorial and verbal fragments in Schneeman's collages parallel Pound's organizational technique in *The Cantos*, especially in how disparate

features yield a spontaneously created order by way of a catalyzing or central “vortex.” “The image is not an idea,” Pound explains. “It [the image] is a radiant node or cluster; it is...a VORTEX, from which and through which, and into which ideas are always rushing” (Pound 290). In Schneeman’s collaborations, one visual image -- usually the largest -- operates as the vortex or node from which other ideas or images “rush.”

In *Love Poem (Ball)* (c 1969-1970) a Berkson-Schneeman collaboration, half-eclipsed yellow sun appears behind a drawn sphere that is inlaid with baseball-like seams and blue colored waves. The somewhat abstract layered spheres are surrounded by poet hyper-compressed imagistic writing: “LOVE POEM. The grey ball/goes batty.” In *Egg Girl* (ca. 1970), a Padgett-Schneeman collaboration, Pound-like apparitional effects also predominate. A photo of a young girl in a white dress inspecting a pail of eggs is pasted on white illustration board, framed by a drawn square, and forms a quiet vortex. The photo parallels, on the left side of the board, a quadrangular insert of prose. That text, set in expansive white space and juxtaposed against the image of the young girl, becomes a lexical extension of that photo’s visual data, just as the photo itself then becomes a talismanic sign involved with the collage’s cutout language:

Never
 before hand she had that
 queer sensation
 in her insides, or heard convers-
 ation issuing from the
 pit of her stomach.

Similarly arranged around visual-lexical vortices and relying on spare, haiku-like poetics is *Ted* (1967), a large collaborative collage painting by Berrigan and Schneeman, in which the work’s polyphonic effects resemble those of Pound’s poetics. Dated “Valentine’s Day 1966” it features a Fauvist-inspired portrait of the bearded poet Ted Berrigan, who is dressed in an Army-issued fatigue shirt, his last name splayed across the right side of his chest. His figure projects a luminous classicism even as he sits semi-slouched in an easy chair. Berrigan’s abstract figure, painted in green, tan and charcoal gray, functions as a visual whorl from which and through which chains of added associations pass. Painted snippets of Berrigan’s verse emerge near the colored swatches that fill the checkered space around him. An upside-down, fan-like, folded current copy of *Life* magazine, the cover of which features a cascade of colorful pills and capsules, dangles from Berrigan’s thick hands; in the corner of the collage, the poet’s painted words pronounce that, “God is alive + well in Mexico.” *Ted*’s visual-verbal insinuations resemble Pound’s poetic interweaving

of light comedy, contemporary urgency and classicism in *Pisan Cantos*, such as “Canto LXXIV” which cross references “Possum” (poet T.S. Eliot), “Dioce” in “the color of stars,” “white ox on the road toward Pisa,” “Jim” (novelist James Joyce) singing a folk song (“Blarney castle me darlin’”) alongside textually rendered landscapes with “green splendor and as the sun thru pale fingers,” and the sudden portrait of a proximate “Mr Edwards superb green and brown/in ward No 4.” (Pound 153-156).

Liz Taylor (1969), is another collage that deploys a visual vortex to produce extremes of association and meanings. This collaboration with poet Michael Brownstein relies on a late-1960s celebrity magazine cutout photo of actress Elizabeth Taylor, her profile inlaid in white trimming. Her busty décolletage and long hair transform the fading movie star into an Italianate madonna, thereby transposing a midcentury American movie icon into a trans-historical, universalized figure. Further intermingling an American idiom with a classical flourish, the collage places Taylor’s silhouette on the left margin of the white paper and harmonizes it with an early Renaissance-era painting of a cityscape, characterized by intricate coloration and dramatic depth perspectives. Then the American quotidian interrupts the scene, in the form of an eerily drawn black hand and assorted socks of various colors suspended against the picture’s white background. In a Pound-like juxtaposing of visual imagery and spontaneous feeling, Brownstein’s poetic lines declare, “some smile/others sputter with rage.”

In addition to Pound’s influence, the poetics of William Carlos Williams are another crucial influence in Schneeman’s collaborative work with the New York School poets. Williams, himself a former painter, published four important volumes of poetry during the period in which the New York School’s poetics developed in earnest – the four-volume releases of *Paterson* (1946-49; 1951), followed by *The Desert Music and Other Poems* (1954), *Journey to Love* (1955) and *Pictures from Bruegel and Other Poems* (1963). Parallels between Williams’ poetry and Schneeman’s collaborations extend to their egalitarian politics around subject matter. Like the New York School poets whom he influenced, Williams harbors neither nostalgia for fading hierarchies nor the disdain for mass culture characteristic in the work of other American modernists like Pound and T.S. Eliot. Instead Williams’ poetry generates its diction and patterns by modeling them explicitly on daily, ordinary and obscure, humble facets of urban and domestic American life. Like Williams in his poetry, Schneeman’s collaborations with the New York School poets pay droll, concentrated attention to ordinary objects, streetscapes, domestic spaces and interiors, as well as intimate evocations of strangers, friends and family.

In 1952, prefiguring the ambition of Schneeman and the poets, Williams tells interviewer Walter Sutton, “I’ve attempted to fuse poetry and painting, to make it the same thing” (Costello). Like the Schneeman collaborations, Williams’ poetics applies words to pictorial, “non-discursive”

ends to create “an art of showing, not telling or saying...that depends crucially on its medium” (Gee 397). The determination to exploit language’s pictorial tendencies and its plasticity informs all of Schneeman’s collaborations, wherein the poets’ language is rendered through painterly means, such as colored graphite, oil pastels or watercolor, while non-sequential illustrations “read” like an alphabet made of pictograms.

Williams’ describes his poetics as invested in language’s malleability and in accidental arrangements, two of the most prominent features of Schneeman’s collaborations with the poets. A poetic line in Williams -- as in the poetry embedded in Schneeman’s assemblages -- conveys meaning through phonetic texture rather than through words’ references to objects or histories external to the text. Commenting on the tactility of language in his poems, Williams writes, “Note how the words *alive*, *skin*, *painted*, *described*, *dreamed* come into the design of these sentences... [with] a curious immediate quality quite apart from their meanings” (Kenner 114).

Williams’ terse economy and blunt colloquial style are equally important to Schneeman’s collaborations. First generation New York School poet Kenneth Koch, who taught both Bill Berkson and Ron Padgett in poetry workshops in the late 1950s and early 1960s, attributes the New York School’s free-ranging diction to Williams’ innovations in that area. Koch states that, “If Williams was using plain American speech, what we wanted to use was plain American speech, fancy speech, comic book talk, translation talk, libretto talk, everything, we wanted all kinds of speech” (Silverberg 60). Schneeman’s poet-collaborators built their writing careers on openness to all forms of twentieth century American discourse. This is reflected in the original poetry embedded in the collaborations which imitate the language of children’s books, comic books, instruction manuals, self-help guides, radio promotional spots, news bulletins, and fortune telling.

In Schneeman’s collaborations, an ordinary intuition, in word or image, is arranged with a Williams-like exactitude, exploiting pauses, gaps, caesura, as well as sudden, blunt declamations. For instance, in *Rainbow* (1970), created with Dick Gallup, a short Williams-like imagist poem drawn in delicate calligraphy -- “rain bow/falling on fruit/in a bag full of groceries” -- has been illustrated with green, red and yellow bands of penciled color. The poem and its colored background are juxtaposed with a gray, black and white rectangular painting of a skeletal figure obscured by vertical, white painted words that reads “His Fucking Wife.” The profane, chaotic rectangular image-and-text is then offset by domestic tranquility -- a small drawing of a breakfast table and the silhouette of a black cat. As if in a Williams’ poem, the words operate like pigments do in the painting. The words draw attention strictly to their aural or vocal force, resisting significance beyond those physical properties. The juddering contrasts among Gallup’s lyrical, “rain-bow” poem, the profane gray and black image-text and Schneeman’s sinuous drawings of

domestic images resemble the typographical syncopations and abrupt turns of attention taken in Williams' poetic lines.

In another characteristic work that further links Schneeman's collaborations to Williams' poetics, a lithograph created with Alice Notley features a wire hanger from which dangle a pair of finely drawn sheer stockings. Below the image is an Imagist-style poem composed in the form of a note to an unnamed domestic partner, a format modeled on William's famous poem "This is Just to Say," which dovetails from confessional mode into sensual imagism via a mode of direct, though enigmatic address:

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold.

Comparably Notley's poem addresses an unnamed interlocutor and repeatedly evokes the tactile physicality of the stockings figured in Schneeman's drawing [see figure 4].



Figure 4. With Alice Notley Untitled, 1980 lithograph for a calendar 14" x 8 1/2"
 © George Schneeman Estate, Granary Books

Another Williams-like pattern, in which epiphany is achieved through a meditation around simple everyday images, informs a small poster created by Padgett and Schneeman. The poetic lines are punctuated by colored sketches of a bicycle pump, a 1950s-era car and a smiling girl's face. As in a Williams' poem, the work utilizes quotidian details and sudden line breaks to draw attention to the visionary concreteness of ordinary existence, informing the viewer and reader:

Life is a dream
 when you wake up
 you are not dead.

As in Williams' poetics, local and immediate objects surface in language and in modestly drawn images that embody those objects on the page itself. Those objects are further charged by unexpected shifts or displacements, as well as by implied analogies between the verbal-pictorial objects, a recurring technique in Schneeman's collaborations with poets. "Copenhagen" (1968), created with Ron Padgett, features gloved hands, a red packet of the eponymous tobacco and an

envelope banded with typescript poetic lines. Like the abstract, colored markings on the envelope, the corporeality of language becomes the collage's meaning. The typescript, "Copenhagen is the capital city of Denmark" precedes a redacted line about "Cloves" which is itself followed by a blunt radio news bulletin -- "lined into left field for a base hit" -- that recalls such instances in counterpoint in Williams' poetry.

Like Williams' poetry, Schneeman's collaborations resituate reality into language and image. Through that transposition, domestic moments, daily routines, consumer objects and desultory spaces recuperate their forgotten essence as exceptional, aesthetically charged happenstances. This phenomenon may be the special "privacy in relationship," that Alice Notley referred to when speaking about her impression of George Schneeman's early paintings.

The underlying ideal motivating most avant-garde movements in the twentieth century was to merge art and life, or to undo the institutionally imposed partitions between art and life. Ultimately, to borrow Marxist categories, the avant-garde sought to rescue art from becoming merely a surplus value (as commodity) by preserving and renewing its use value. This revolutionary merging of art and life was a particularly compelling motive for Schneeman, and an attribute which drew many of his New York poet-collaborators into his orbit. As scholar Jenni Quilter notes, Schneeman's "art and life were one in the same," as every object in the apartment was made by the painter, "bookshelves, cupboards, tables, chairs, even a harpsichord and his son's toys—as well as ceramic bowls, mugs, and plates and lampstands" (217). This unity of aesthetic worth and practical function developed from a lifestyle Schneeman had cultivated in Italy.

And that ethos is apparent in his collaborations with poets, wherein the works' composite gestures, vortices, and images – whether pictorial or linguistic or a combination of both -- retain a simplicity and commonality like that of ordinary experience and intimate, interpersonal relationships. In an interview with poet Alice Notley, Schneeman sought to explain his attempts to reveal the everyday as awash in such aesthetic intensities. In doing so, he defines the collaborative work as informed by his own version of Platonic idealism and describes what amounts to a late modernist creed about the aura that palpates within the ordinary. "I think it's a good idea to make people see," Schneeman tells Notley, "that everything that everybody does at every minute is in some other level than what it actually is."

And so the ultimate achievement of Schneeman's collaborative work with the New York poets might best be measured by how resistant it is to the postmodern urge for reproducibility and exhibitionism, and those concomitant surplus values that have come to define art-making as merely a highbrow species of consumerism.

Schneeman's collaborations with the poets, intended mainly for private non-commercial enjoyment, affirm a mode of existence and set of relations that predate those works' public viewing.

The collaborations embody what Walter Benjamin famously calls the vanished “ritual” and “cult value” of the artwork, that “aura” of “uniqueness... inseparable from [the artworks] being embedded in the fabric of tradition” (Benjamin 223). That “tradition” has largely been displaced, at least in present-day New York City. Schneeman’s collaborative creations had been by-products of their makers’ daily routines—namely, writing and painting—and they functioned like this quite consciously apart from and impervious to galleries and the marketplace.

Somewhat ironically, these Schneeman collaborative projects took place not very far, geographically speaking, from Andy Warhol’s fabled “Factory,” with its ostentatious reproductions, “screen tests” and manufactured celebrities. These latter elements have come to characterize a hyper-mediated ecosystem we largely recognize as inescapably ours. Schneeman’s collaborative works, I have tried to argue, were made in hopeful resistance to this disconcerting outcome.

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