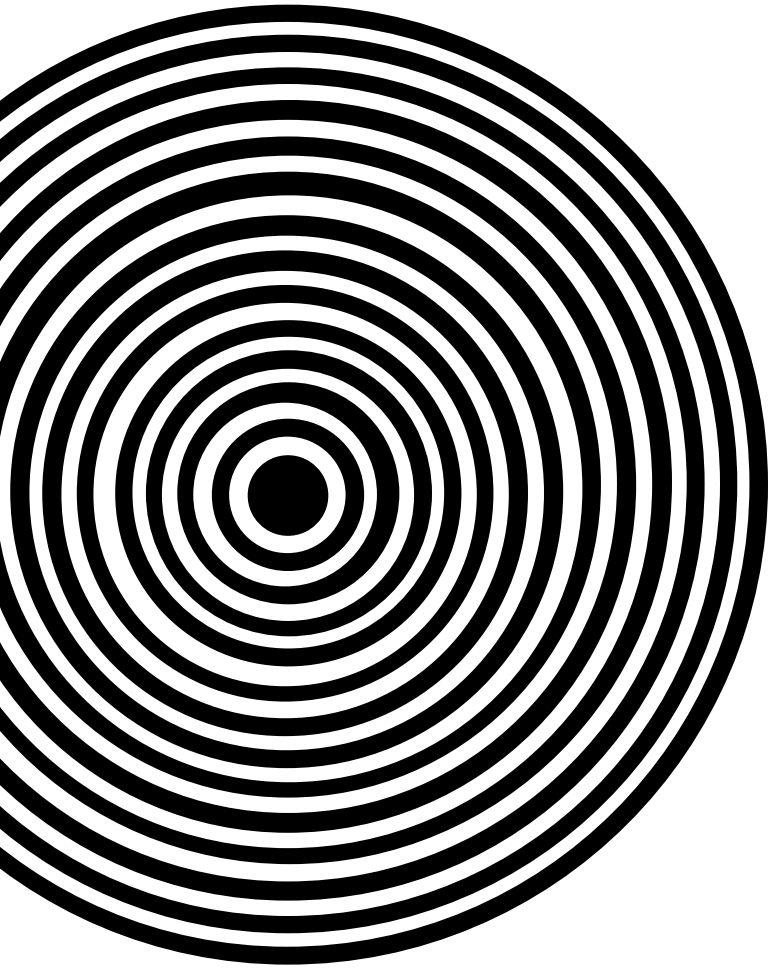

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AMONG THE NEIGHBORS

About *Telephone*

An Interview
with Maureen Owen

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AMONG THE NEIGHBORS 19.2

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An Interview with Maureen Owen

Part I

The Story of Telephone. *Janaury 26, 2021.*

MCK: Maybe we could go back in time to start. You were in Japan in 1965 after you finished school, and then in 1968, you were in New York City working with The Poetry Project. What were those in-between years like?

MO: I went to Japan from San Francisco, on a ship called the Sakura Maru. I was travelling with Lauren Owen. We were in Japan about two and a half years, actually—on a two-month visa forever! We were travelling and we were living on Shikoku, the southern island near Kyushu, and we went back to Tokyo to make some money to get back to the United States. We'd been living by just teaching English in small towns and high schools, and in Shikoku we were staying with this really wonderful English teacher in a high school, Mr. Morishita, and his family. So we went back to Tokyo and made some money, and then came back to the United States. And we were in San Francisco just a very short time.

Lauren's father had some land and a little cabin in Missouri, on the White River, right near Branson. But at that time, Branson, Missouri was nothing—like a thousand people living there, if even! So we were kind of hippie types, and lived there about a year doing hippie things, living off the land, picking wild asparagus. We were going to leave and we were thinking, should we go back to San Francisco? But Lauren was from Tulsa, so he knew Ron Padgett, Dick Gallup, Ted Berrigan, and they were all in New York. So he said, well, I have some friends in New York, and so I thought, let's go to New York—because I'd never been there, and I'd been to San Francisco. So we went to New York. And that was in the summer of 1968.

And we stayed with Ron and Patty and then with Johnny Stanton and his family for a few weeks. We had two children in Japan, two boys, and so they were a variable. We got an apartment on 13th Street between B and C, I think it was. And you know in those days it was so cheap to live there. And then The Poetry Project was just a few blocks away, so I kind of gravitated over to The Poetry Project and gradually started meeting people. And there were a lot of poets and artists and writers living on the Lower East Side, so it was a pretty strong community there. Because I had two little kids, I met several of the women because we'd be in the park together with the kids. And a lot of them really, really good writers like Rebecca Wright, and just so many good people. And Sandy Berrigan was there at that time too—and Sandy Berrigan wrote also but was totally overshadowed by the fact that Ted Berrigan wrote.

And so I started thinking about—here's all these people! I met Yuki Hartman, and a lot of the people that I first published. And Anne Waldman was doing *The World* magazine, but it was just one small mimeo magazine and so it could only hold so many people and was coming out not that often.[1] And so I started thinking, well, maybe I could do a magazine!

And I don't know how I got that idea because I had *no* idea how to do it. [laughs] But I thought, well, maybe I can. So I went over to The Poetry Project and I asked Anne if I could use the Gestetner. And she wonderfully said yes! That's the nice thing about that whole community, it was very open, generous—people helped each other more. Much more than San Francisco—because when I was there, I was sort of on the periphery of the poetry scene. I didn't know that many people, but I knew David Bearden from his brother—I went to

[1] Edited by Joel Sloman, Anne Waldman, and others, *The World* magazine was published in 58 issues between January 1967 and 2002, when Waldman and Sloman were assistants at The Poetry Project. Guest editors included Tom Clark, Lewis Warsh, Ron Padgett, and Bernadette Mayer. See: Anne Waldman, "Running off *The World*" in Steven Clay and Rodney Phillips, eds. *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side: Adventures in Writing, 1960-1980*, The New York Public Library and Granary Books, 1998, pp. 186-188.

high school with his brother, James Bearden, actually, down in Southern California. James introduced me to David, and I knew Charlie Plymell. But there wasn't that kind of openness like there was in New York where people were just generous to help you do things, and it was a much different kind of atmosphere than San Francisco. Or at least the people I knew there then. Because that was like, you know, Kerouac and Neal Cassady and people like that. They had kind of their own scene going, to say the least!

So anyway, then Anne and Larry Fagin—Larry Fagin, I don't know if he was working in The Poetry Project office or just hanging out there [laughs], but he did *Adventures in Poetry* magazine, a mimeo.[2] So they both were so helpful and they said well, you have to type stencils. Which I [makes "at a loss" sound]. So Larry gave me a lesson in typing stencils and he pretty much taught me how to type stencils.

Typing stencils was just a nightmare, really. Because I was on a big ol' electric typewriter and if you make a mistake, you have to correct it with the stencil fluid, and then you have to realign it, and you can only make a mistake about twice on a stencil and then you have to start over with the whole thing.

And of course I was publishing people who were writing very experimental kind of works, they were all over the place so I was lining up—trying to line up words and do things like that.

MCK: Did you also put in the little drawings?

MO: Yeah, I did all the little drawings! I put the stencil up on a windowpane, and with a stylus I would copy the drawing.

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[2] Larry Fagin edited the little magazine *Adventures in Poetry* in New York City from 1968 to 1975, spanning 12 issues; his publishing imprint by the same name also produced 48 books, including Owen's *Country Rush* in 1973. See: Larry Fagin on *Adventures in Poetry*, in Steven Clay and Rodney Phillips, eds. *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side: Adventures in Writing, 1960-1980*, The New York Public Library and Granary Books, 1998, pp. 194-197.

MCK: I love those little drawings.

MO: Oh good! I loved doing them actually! I wanted the drawings, but I thought, how could I possibly do this? And then I thought: ah, I could just copy it on the windows [up against the glass, using the light]. I didn't have a light table then; a light table would have been a smart idea, but we didn't really have room for one in the railroad apartment we were living in. And I really didn't know about them, even!

Then Anne told me about—at that time—down in Lower Manhattan, there were all these big paper companies and they often had remnants of paper that were super cheap, just stacks of leftovers. And so I went down to get some paper, and those places were unbelievable. If you love paper. But of course we do. You'd just walk into this huge warehouse of towering shelves and stacks and piles of paper of all colors and textures and it was just fabulous—it was like, oh my god, just like being in a pastel technicolor exotic parrot jungle paradise or something, such pillars and pillars of paper!

So I bought very cheaply a few reams of paper and the reason I went to that size—the 8½ by 14 inches—was that I wanted to call the magazine *Telephone*, for a couple of reasons. Briefly: I was from the West Coast—the Midwest and the West Coast—and in those environments socially you'd just drop in on people. But I found pretty fast that in New York, you called first in those days, because people were usually up all night writing or something and they were half asleep during the day or sleeping during the day. So after appearing at somebody's door—one time I appeared at Ron and Patty's about 10 o' clock in the morning and they'd just gone to bed—I started to learn that the telephone's important to do, to just make a call. Then also Ma Bell was a big issue right at that period of time. There was all this stuff going on about pricing and corruption.

So I thought: I'll do the *telephone book*, I'll include everyone. I wanted to be very inclusive, because I felt some people had no place to publish really, that were really good. So that's how I came to call it

Telephone, and then when I was in the paper company, I saw these 8½ by 14 sheets of paper, and I thought, oh my god, it looks like a telephone booth! Because in those days, you had telephone booths all over Manhattan! So that's how it got the size, which turned out to be problematic, but, it didn't really matter too much.

MCK: Problematic in what way?

MO: Well, when you took it to bookstores, they couldn't shelve it. They had enough problems that it had no spine—no information on the spine, and so that was bad enough—and then the size, they'd say "oh my god…" but Eighth Street Bookshop was always so sweet.[3] Every time I'd walk in, they'd go, "oh, another issue of *Telephone*!" Other places were like, "I don't know where we're going to put this, grrr."

MCK: I thought that the paper size was very strategic because of how many contributors you had.

MO: It definitely was great for space on the page and poems. Because that's really important to me in my work and in doing the magazine and books, to have. I think the space is so important for the words. I just hate books where everything is crunched in. It was great, it was like having a landscape. You can make a painting, almost.

And then, Anne gave me a lesson on the Gestetner, which was completely horrifying. Not because she had given me a bad lesson but because, oh my god, you had to add ink, so many steps. So I asked Tom Veitch who was a graphic artist and did these great graphic

[3] Operated by brothers Elias and Ted Wilentz, the 8th Street Bookshop was located at 32 W. 8th Street (at the corner of McDougal) from 1947 to 1965, and from 1965 until 1979 at 17 West 8th Street. "8th Street Bookshop." *Village Alliance*, https://greenwichvillage.nyc. Accessed 10 March 2022.

comics at the time and also wrote really good stuff, so he helped me run off the first issue. And then I kind of got the hang of it.

I love mimeo because it's so beautiful. The paper is a pure white, and then the ink is so black, and fresh ink out of the tube sort of stands up on the page in a way. I couldn't believe when the first stencil ran off because it was like magic. Typing the stencil had been hell, and then I thought, is this really gonna work? But it did! It looked great! When I got the hang of it and could pretty much do it after that first issue, I ran off everything by myself. I would often work at night because I had the two boys, and so I'd go over and had someone watch them, and the church late at night was kind of spooky, St. Mark's Church. Barbara Holland, a poet frequenting the readings and workshops then, was always talking about how haunted it was. Peter Stuyvesant was famous for being buried there in the churchyard, and she would always say she could hear him walking, his wooden leg. I'd be there late at night, and the Gestetner made a huge noise, like *KJUNGK KJUNGK KJUNGK*, and when it stopped, in between pages or if something went wrong and you had to fix it, it would be so quiet in the church and I swear I could hear that wooden leg walking! It was really kind of spooky!

MCK: So spooky! But a lot of people were using this mimeo at different times, right?

MO: Right, exactly, so you'd have to fit it in. That Gestetner, I don't know what happened to it, but it should have been bronzed or something. It famously produced so many things.

All the little magazines used it also. And I did all the first books on it before I started getting them printed. All the copies of *The World* were done on it, and the earlier Poetry Project newsletters were all done on it too, when Billy MacKay was editor.[4]

[4] Bill (or Billy) Mackay was the second editor of *The Poetry Project Newsletter* from 1973–1975, and also assisted in running open readings on Monday nights. He was, as Owens recalls, "a regular at The Poetry Project…a sweet, sweet guy, always helpful. He knew everyone." See: Miles Champion, "Insane

MCK: You've talked about publishing poets who just weren't getting traction in other places, or you felt there just wasn't an outlet for them. I'm curious how you saw the work you were doing with *Telephone* as related to, but also different from, what everyone else at St. Mark's was working on at that time.

MO: Well, because I had this grandiose idea to make it like the telephone book, being so inclusive, right? So the first couple of issues I asked people for work, and then after that, people just started giving me work, and I'd be at a reading or something and they'd come up with their poems. And then, after maybe seven or eight issues, where it started to get distributed by hand all around, and even went over to England—after that, I started getting these submissions from all over. More than just from people I knew. And I pretty much got overwhelmed pretty fast. So I thought, unfortunately, it isn't the telephone book! I just couldn't do that many works, even though it was good writing. So I decided—it was a big decision because it was totally the opposite of what I wanted to do—to put a little note in and say "no unsolicited submissions." It was really heartrending, and I put it in there. And it made no difference at all.

It was so funny because I had a post office box at Chelsea Station for the magazine, and I would go to pick up my mail and the guys there would just start laughing, because it had gone way beyond the box. They would give me one of those big mail bags, and I literally would have to drag it, I couldn't pick it up, it was so full of submissions. I would drag it down the subway steps home. It was overwhelming! It just kind of mushroomed in this wonderful way.

MCK: Did you get a lot of poetry, or did you find that people were sending you a mix of different genres, visual…

MO: Well, Dave Morice in the Midwest, the inventor of the fabulous *Poetry Comics*, sent comic strips and did a cover. Other visuals came in

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Podium: A Short History, The Poetry Project 1966–2012" at https://www.2009-2019.poetryproject.org/about/history/. Accessed March 12, 2022.

from artists I didn't know previously and especially those working in collage. Wonderful comic strips from a T.O. Sylvester, a pseudonym for two young women collaborating, one of whom was Terry Ryan. Most submissions came in from all over the place unsolicited, fresh and bold poetry or short prose, but other genres too, definitely a mix.

MCK: I think of the contributor lists: it was a modest 25 people or so in the first issue, and that was as low as you ever went! It was about 90 at one point! And as I was cataloging, I was typing out the names just applauding you, for publishing so many people—the whole "telephone book," maybe it wasn't on the nose, but you really accomplished a ton in that magazine.

MO: I did. I tried to fulfill my original promise. [laughs]

MCK: Is there a poet in terms of Telephone Books—and also *Telephone* magazine—poet or poets that you are particularly proud of having worked with or having shared their work?

MO: I think all of the books I did, all of them were people who probably were in the magazine before I did the books. Because a lot of times, I went to a lot of readings, and I would hear people read, and I'd say, "wow, I really liked your work, could you send me something?" And then I would do a book of theirs. So some of them, like Susan Howe, Janet Hamill, Patricia Spears Jones, Rebecca Wright, Rebecca Brown, Regina Beck, Yuki Hartman, Ed Friedman, I lived near them too, so I could—so we hung out a little bit, and stuff like that.

MCK: That makes collaboration easier, when you're neighbors.

MO: Yeah! Maybe the best part of the whole thing was that when I would do an issue of *Telephone*, I would just tell everybody that lived nearby, even though there were a lot of people in there [*Telephone*] that didn't, and we would meet at the Parish Hall at St. Marks and we would just collate it. And a hundred people would show up or something. There'd be little kids, and pizza, and Coke—just a great

community activity, it was really fun. Then everybody would take a few copies to distribute, and so it just worked in a very organic, community kind of way that was just fabulous. Before I came to New York, I really didn't have a sense of a poetry community at all. I knew a few individual poets in San Francisco, but not even that many. Growing up, I loved poetry, but I didn't really know anybody. So to be in that whole environment with the artists and poets and everybody just doing, thinking, exploring, experimenting with words, with poetry, was just kind of heaven, really.

MCK: It's hard to imagine, even, like all those big bags of mail, one hundred people showing up, the openness—I mean, that's incredible.

MO: I think it was a special time for that sort of thing. Just because we were all there and young, and so involved, and kind of inspired each other. It was just a real coming-together that probably doesn't happen except in very extremely lucky situations.

MCK: It's kind of a magical time, from what everyone talks about.

MO: Yeah. It was a magical time.

MCK: And thinking too of the physical format of *Telephone* magazine, the first handful were mimeographed and then you switched to printing offset, right?

MO: For offset printing for the magazine I used Midwest printers, like Edwards Bros. and Thomson-Shore, because they were very inexpensive. For the books I usually worked with The Print Center in Brooklyn then. The Print Center had a magnificent, looked-like-turn-of-the-century stapling machine. You actually sat on it in a tractor seat and laid the book over a bar and worked the staple stitch with foot pedals as I recall. For the staples it held a huge roll of wire, and each staple was cut as you stitched. It made quite a sound. I did most of my own stapling of the books. As in the mimeo, I loved the hands-on and the farm machinery-ness of the stapler.

And Ed Hogan was my typesetter. He was fabulous. His Aspect Composition did all my typesetting except for some of the much later titles set by Skeezo Typesetting.

MCK: And he was doing his own magazine too, right?

MO: Yeah, he was very active. And great guy, really wonderful. I really liked him. He typeset a bunch of Telephone Books. But I would do all the corrections and pasteup and stuff for the typesetting before printing, so that was a lot of hands-on kind of work too. It's a whole other kind of involvement with the poem, when you're doing that kind of work with it. Like Janine Pommy Vega's book, *Morning Passage*—there's so much energy in that book. I would paste up one poem and be reading and fixing and then I would just be so excited about the poem I'd have to stop and just go outside for a minute and walk around and come back and do another one. Because you're involved in the poem in a different way than if you're just reading it. You're really watching where each word sets, and each letter, and a number of people are very particular, myself included, to have everything line up exactly. Which was always easier to do when I was typing stencils, because everyone else was working on the typewriter also. When you switched from the typewriter over to typesetting, even with leading and everything, you couldn't get it quite the same. It's not quite the same. There's nothing like the typewriter on the page, I think. But now, of course, nobody uses one, so… [laughs]

MCK: Maybe for creative applications, but I mean, totally not in the same way. We have the digital precision of online…

MO: Right, everyone's working on computers now and stuff. It's different.

MCK: And thinking about those different phases of design, did you have a favorite type of, you know, the saddle-stitched, the perfect-bound, the mimeo, did you have a favorite aesthetic version of *Telephone* or a type of printing that just drew you the most?

MO: I actually think the mimeograph, the first issues, were my favorite, really. In terms of every page. I could do a little more with the typesetting version, and have more art in it, and maybe fancier covers for sure. But I just love the look of the typewriter, the type on the page. I love the look of mimeo—and I love the urgency of it. You can just create something in a very short time and then it's out there, it doesn't take two years to get a book out. It's very immediate, which was really I think important and wonderful in those days, because a lot of people were experimenting. Maybe you'd print a poem that they'd change eventually. Everything was kind of unfinished or in flux in a lot of ways, and people were very adventurous and not afraid to try something. Not afraid to look foolish—all those things that crunch down creativity were not there; it was just kind of wide open. So mimeo works so beautifully for that.

MCK: I noticed that in *Telephone*, especially the early issues, that there are often collaborative works, between people like Ron and Pat Padgett. How was that done?

MO: A lot of people did collaborations, and that's kind of what I was just saying, there was a lot of just play, playful works in there that maybe wouldn't appear in somebody's *Collected,* I don't know. But they're kind of wonderful because they're just playing with language and words and thoughts and what's going on. Kind of innocent, playful, in this great way.

MCK: I see a certain playfulness in the aesthetic of your bookmaking, too. I love those advertisement endpapers.

MO: I love doing that! That came about because I thought, I'll never be able to afford color, right? And so then I thought, well, there's color in all the commercial magazines—especially in *New York Times* magazines, with these gorgeous colors. And so then I got the idea to kind of have endpapers and that was totally fun. It was like making an artwork, because each book was different, and you could create it to comport differently. I didn't do it randomly. I cut out a bunch and then I'd see what kind of fit with that book.

MCK: I liked that aspect. In the copy of Cataldo's *Brooklyn Queens Day* I cataloged, there was a red fast car as the front endpaper and then the back was like a closeup of a horse's legs and someone walking…

MO: I kind of remember those two illustrations, actually!

MCK: They struck me! And it's fun to see print kind of playfully pull together in that way.

MO: That's what I loved about doing those earlier things, because when I started out, I really wanted to be an artist. As a child I drew a lot, and I wrote also—but more so painting and drawing and things like that. And so, when I was doing the books, it was really fun to think of each thing as a separate kind of art piece in a way. And I just loved making things. I've been thinking about it a lot lately, because, I don't know, I'm out of that time of mimeograph for sure, but I kind of miss making things.

MCK: Do you think you'd ever make another Telephone book?

MO: I don't know. My friend Rose Lesniak—the last few books I did, a couple of them, including Janet Hamill's book—they're kind of pocket-sized. And Rose said, "oh, you should have called them 'Cell Phone.'" I said, wow, I wish I thought of that. [both laugh]

I'd like to do something, but I haven't decided what. I mean, when I'm writing, when I'm working on a manuscript, I do a lot of visual stuff with it, but usually ends up not being in the actual book when it comes out. But I don't know. I just really like making things.

MCK: I completely agree—I started making books, in earnest last year, and the *satisfaction*—

MO: Yeah!

MCK: Okay, I've chosen this paper, this is looking good, everything's centered—

MO: Yeah!

MCK: It's pleasing to control, and make it beautiful.

MO: Yeah, to make it really beautiful! A book is a separate thing; it's like it *is* a beautiful object, really, you know.

MCK: It's nice to make it that way. Thinking too of how publishing projects begin and morph and then come to a close—the last *Telephone* magazine was no. 19, and it was in 1983. And I know that you received funding at various points, from the National Endowment for the Arts, and Literary Council funding. I can only imagine how much paper you were buying on a regular basis. And of course, printing was not to get your kids' college paid for, that's not how literary magazines work—

MO: [laughing] No, no…

MCK: I was curious how you decided to stop publishing *Telephone* magazine, and if you could say more about the efforts and the details and the logistics that let you do this for so long. I mean just, it's a huge logistical thing to publish so many people, so frequently, for so, so many years.

MO: Yeah, it's true, it's true. Well, I think a lot of the time I just kind of somehow skimmed along financially, and then around 1983 I started having to think about college for the kids… [both laugh] But also it just got more expensive to live, and I lived pretty frugally for quite a long time. And it got even more expensive, and I just kind of ran out of money, actually. And also I was working fulltime at a day job. I had the position of catalog manager for the Inland Book Company, which was a very innovative book distribution company run by David Wilk and Steve Hargraves, and so it just kind of hit a point where I really didn't have the finances and I thought I'd better start focusing on making money. So it was more that than anything.

The ironic thing is, when I moved to Denver, I started teaching, besides having another day job. I started teaching at Naropa University, and Junior Burke, who also taught there, began this program of distance learning, so I was teaching on campus and online. We got this idea to do a magazine online, which is a whole other thing. The great thing about doing it online was you could include tremendous artwork and audio, songs, all kinds of different things. But here's the ironic thing: we ended up doing 19 issues! Isn't that bizarre? I just think that's so bizarre. And it wasn't a choice of ours, really, it was just that Naropa kind of ran out of funds, again, to sustain it.

It was called *Not Enough Night*. And that's a Jack Kerouac quote. From one of his books, "There's not enough night..."

But I continued to publish books after I'd stopped doing the magazine.

MCK: Right! You were publishing Telephone Books up through the 2000s.

MO: Yeah. Exactly. Some books like Will Bennett's book—such a good poet, so wonderful. He never really got his work out there enough, I think. There's some really wonderful poets who just don't get out there enough and so you don't see their work. And a lot too because they're more experimental and exploring and more…better! I think. [laughs] The really good poets.

MCK: I enjoyed the variety of different types of writing that showed up in Telephone Books. Especially Rebecca Brown's story about bicycling all around…boy, was that great!

MO: I know!

MCK: So fantastic!

MO: Yes! See there's a typical example, such a good writer, lived in New York, hung on for quite a long time, and just got despairing over

her writing never getting enough play. And also living on the cusp of, you know, existence, kind of. So she switched to science fiction, and is quite an interesting science fiction writer, and then because she still didn't have very much money, she moved to Nicaragua. She lives in Nicaragua now. And she still writes science fiction. And she's won a couple of science fiction awards. Such a good writer. Really, really good.

MCK: That's great.

MO: It's hard being a poet, you know! It's not a big money business.

MCK: Publishing from 1969 all the way up to the 2000s, you probably saw a lot of changes in community and, I mean even the difference between 1969 and 1983—the run of *Telephone*—what was it like to watch those changes? What kind of changes jumped out at you about how the scene was different from St. Mark's and meeting kids in the park, and that energy?

MO: Well, I'd say the scene at St. Mark's stayed pretty consistent, it was always really exciting, and at the Church there was a theater group, and then Danspace came in too, so such a vital hub of creativity and exploration and excitement going on there.[5] I'd say that stayed a lot the same. People kind of came and went, and myself, I moved. Unless you have a lot of money it's hard to find good schools in New York, it's a little rough. So I moved up to Connecticut when the boys were like in grade school, but I commuted to The Poetry Project and then became a regular train rider.

[5] The Danspace Project was based at St. Mark's Church along with The Poetry Project, and founded in 1974 by dancers Barbara Dilley and Mary Overlie, along with poet Larry Fagin. Danspace was envisioned as a performance and dance community to support new choreographers and dancers, as well as those affiliated with the earlier nearby Judson Dance Theater. Danspace remains active today. For more information, see the Danspace Project records at The New York Public Library's Jerome Robbins Dance Division, or visit the organization's website at www.danspaceproject.org.

MCK: Because you were working there, right, as program coordinator?

MO: Right, yeah, I worked there a long time. So then I wasn't around in the streets but I think Rebecca Wright had already moved back to Jefferson City, Missouri, and a lot of people had gone out to the West Coast, to Bolinas, and then Naropa where Anne started focusing, so nothing stayed the same forever. We kind of just migrated out. But all those people kept doing things, they were just a wider community.

It's interesting, because about a year ago, another writer, a friend of mine, Barbara Henning, she and I did this little poetry road trip—

MCK: So cool! Tell me more!

MO: It was insane! Well I was living here in Denver and I was teaching at Naropa but I was also working for a publisher, Morton Publishing, they do biology textbooks for college and university students. It wasn't literary at all, but it was a good job, and they were very sweet to let me go teach a class at Naropa in the afternoon and come back to work. They just couldn't have been nicer. Then I thought, I started thinking, well, I've finally paid off my house, that was my goal, and then I thought, now maybe I could retire, what a great idea. Ah! Because I was like 74 or so. And so about a few months before I retired, because I had always wanted to do—when I was growing up, my parents worked on the racetrack, so we were kind of in constant travel here and there, rather nomadic, not a sedentary life at all. We were always on the road, it seemed like, and I kind of loved doing that road trips thing. So I thought of Barbara because I knew she has people up in Michigan, family, and I knew she drove a lot.

[Owen recounts the significant planning involved, and obstacles with weather.]

So we started out: I took the train to New York, and we started out in Brooklyn, and—we had to go in January, February, because Barbara was teaching and that was her break time. And even so, she

had a few students online while we were going. Anyway, it's not the warmest time of the year. But we still had a really great time, even though, so it was so cold, and terrific people.

There is this whole poetry—all over the country, there's this whole poetry connection, there's like all these connecting lines and poets and people. And it's quite wonderful when you travel it. And of course, you know, we only traveled part of it, we had like 16, 17 readings or something like that. It just was wonderful, actually, because everyone was into poetry and writing, and suddenly you got the sense of just how much of the network actually exists. That was really nice, because that was how I felt about the early *Telephone* too—I felt that network as things went out from it and created these amazing links and conjunctions.

MCK: Absolutely. I mean, it strikes me too, you're in touch with many of the people that you published or many of the people that you've known over the years.

MO: Yeah, I think, true, and true for many other people too. A lot of people have stayed in touch, and are still involved in publishing each other—still in that whole world of magazines.

MCK: Yeah! It's nice that *Telephone*, by virtue of you publishing all these different folks, sort of gives you little pinpoints in a map, geographically and historically. There're all these different kinds of layers of legibility that we put on history after the fact to try and have it make more sense. So with histories of poetry, you end up having superstars, and people who are difficult to trace.

MO: Right.

MCK: And the book market works this way too, where people will collect certain authors, and not other authors, so mass coalesces around certain people and certain labels that don't really tell the whole story. So for me, that's the beautiful thing about those massive contributor lists [in *Telephone*] which you so lovingly put together!

You'd write, "STARRING" for your Table of Contents poets, like tah dah!

How important it is to see all these people, and know I'll be able to trace some; some I'm gonna recognize, some I'm not. It seems that just the act of doing that is so important.

MO: I think I felt that so strongly, that how important every person was, how important the work of each person was. To themselves, to the individual, and to the whole. And I have to say, I felt that poetry had saved my life, at a young age. And so, that's how I came into it, with that feeling, it had saved me, and so I kind of wanted to give back to it in a way, or—I don't know how to say that differently—but it gave me a different concept of it. How important each person was. The individual was. And that there were so many individuals. And that there were so many individuals who loved it so much.

When I was a girl, my brother and I went to parochial school. And so, you know, they have you wear uniforms so everyone looks alike, but of course the rich kids all had a different uniform for every day of the week, so they all looked nice and pressed. My brother and I had one uniform, so every other day I'd have to wash and iron those. And so I used to put a book of poems at the end of the ironing board and memorize poems as I ironed. To keep myself sane. And it did keep me sane, and I learned a ton! I memorized a ton of poetry. But I think it gave me a kind of visceral conception of what poetry is and what it can be to somebody, what it can mean. It gave me a different outlook on it. I didn't just go to school and study and like it or love it or whatever, but I kind of grew into it in a way. It was a very organic kind of thing. I just felt it in my whole being. There we go!

MCK: I love that. I relate to that. I mean, just the idea that poetry is a meaningful structure in which to house your life.

MO: Yeah, exactly.

MCK: It can take many forms, it can take the form of writing and producing with people, publishing: solitary and community.

MO: Exactly. Because it's solitary and community. Writing is a solitary function, except when you're collaborating. But then it's also this great community of people, too.

Part II

Bibliographic Details. March 5, 2021.

MCK: You told me to remind you about *The Liberties*!

MO: Oh yeah, *The Liberties*! I should have done it as a Telephone Book—but Sukey [Susan Howe] came to me and she wanted to get it published. And I had already done her *Hinge Picture* but it was later, it was at a time where I had run completely out of money, and I had to start thinking of my children [laughs], and so I told a lot of people that I couldn't publish anything for at least a temporary time. And I even sent back a manuscript or two because I didn't want to hang people up. So when she came to me, I thought, I can't do it as a Telephone Book because I've already told all these people I can't do a Telephone Book right now! But I said, I'll do it, I'll run it off at St. Mark's, but let's just give the press a different name. So she came up with Loon Books, I think it was. I regret now not having done it as a Telephone Book. But I just felt I couldn't! Because all these people—I just, literally sent a couple manuscripts back—and I said I couldn't do it as a Telephone Book. I thought the others would say, "what, you just sent my manuscript back!" But we had a lot of fun doing that. Sukey came and helped me mimeo, and we did the cover, and it was very fun.

MCK: In your interview with Stephanie Anderson, you discuss how you published in *Telephone* magazine under a pseudonym for a few of the earlier issues, and then stopped doing that after there were just so many submissions.[6] Can you tell me more?

MO: Because I was typing the stencils myself, if I had half a page left, and I didn't want to start somebody else's work there—I wanted to give them their space—I made up these names and just put in work

[6] "An Interview with Maureen Owen." *Chicago Review*, vol. 59, no. 1/2 (Fall 2014/Winter 2015), pp. 105-112.

of mine there. I think I used the name Bridget Halen. I always loved the name Bridget and I had a distant Irish relative named Bridget. And oh, Texas Moon, I used that name a lot—especially if I did an illustration—

MCK: I loved the Texas Moon illustrations! I wondered who that was! Those were my favorite! I thought, wow what a badass, Texas Moon, I want to be named Texas Moon.

MO: Those were so fun to do!

MCK: For the pseudonym with the illustrations: did you just want the focus to be more on the magazine, or was it just for fun?

MO: I was just having fun, to tell you the truth. And I guess I had a thing about not publishing myself, too. I was fortunate at the time that a lot of people were publishing me. So I just didn't put any of my own work under my name. Most of the little pieces I put in were just small bits at the bottom of the page. And I also had a number of children of other people and my own children, just little poems from kids in there too.

MCK: Did they see you working on it, and go, oooh, what's that? I want to write a poem!

MO: No, the boys used to write little poems, just because, you know, there were lots of poems around. And so I just put some of them in. And then Michael Lally's son had a poem in one of the issues, and I think Wayne Padgett did too. Again, I had extra space and the kids wrote fresh, terrific works. That was the beauty of the whole stencil mimeograph, of creating the whole work by yourself, just total freedom of what you could do. Or so I thought anyway! I had a very strong sense of—maybe that Irish sense of humor about it, like don't take yourself too seriously, have a little fun. I was serious, certainly, about the books and things, but the magazine, I was able to do some humorous stuff in it. It had a light, humorous quality.

MCK: I love the cover of no. 9, with all the naked animals…

MO: Oh! That's such a great cover!

MCK: Yeah! By the time you get to no. 9 as a reader, you realize, okay, we're having fun here as well as doing poetry.

MO: Especially the artists who did covers also got the sense of that. That was Paula North's cover, and she had the back cover too, with the naked man sunbathing on an apartment rooftop. [laughs] For Joe Brainard's cover, I asked if he wanted to do a cover, and he said, oh, okay, yeah! And just wrote the thing about hating the telephone company. [laughs] So I think people felt that kind of freedom from the magazine that they could just express fearlessly.

MCK: And speaking of art, the little logo—I saw in Fielding Dawson's *Delayed Not Postponed* a note in the colophon that indicates "special thanks to Hugh Kepets for logo drawing."

MO: Yeah, Hugh did that. And in the first issues, I think I had a rubber stamp, and then Hugh drew that logo for me. He's an incredible artist. So I thought that was such a beautiful little telephone.

MCK: I like its delicateness, but it has a good graphic quality on black and white paper.

MO: That's what I love about his work. It's very graphic, and it's just so edgy, and so—the perfection of the graphics, architectural almost, his work.

MCK: On the colophon of *Telephone* no. 6, it states that the magazine is copyright 1972 by Magic Mushroom Press. Can you tell me more about that?

[MCK and MO look at copy]

MO: I probably just made that up, I guess! That definitely sounds like something I'd say, Magic Mushroom Press. Yeah, I guess I just did that!

MCK: Some of the institutions that have a copy of this, they catalog the publisher as "Magic Mushroom."

MO: Great! [both laugh]

MCK: This is the whole point of publishing yourself—you can be Texas Moon. You can be Magic Mushroom Press.

MO: It's true, it's total freedom, it really is.

MCK: What a great little mystery we've solved there! There was something that stuck out to me that was in *Telephone* no. 11—an ominous epigraph that was attributed to Hitler. It reads, "yes, danger from within and without. we need law and order, yes, without law and order a nation can't survive. elect us and we shall restore law and order." Could you tell me more about the context of that? I was struck by it.

MO: I'm actually not completely sure now about the validity of the quotation. But at the time someone had just given it to me, so I just thought, wow, that's very interesting. And I put it in there.[7]

MCK: As I was cataloging your Telephone collection, the storming of the Capitol was happening, with Trump and this rhetoric of "law and order." I encountered that, and felt, whoa, Maureen is really feeling our current moment.

[7] This statement circulated frequently in left-leaning groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and is a fake quote attributed to Hitler. In ephemera, such as posters, it is often mentioned in conjunction with Nixon's attacks on student protestors; it also appeared in newspapers like the *Los Angeles Free Press*.

MO: I know, it totally could fit currently. Or could have fit currently there. That whole thing, law and order. But at the time, I was—something was going on. I was involved a lot in peace demonstrations and civil rights things and so I can't think now specifically but it was related to the current political situation. And you can be there immediately, because you can mimeo something pretty quickly and get it out.

MCK: And when I'm reading it, decades and decades later, it can respond to what I'm experiencing in a very visceral way.

MO: I know! Totally relevant! Unfortunately. But who knows if it's real or if someone just gave it to me and I put it in.

MCK: So this is a very different vein, but one of the things I thought I'd ask you about was the representation of Japanese poetry in particular in *Telephone*. I know a lot of people were translating in your milieu in The Poetry Project, a lot of French translation, but I thought the Japanese poetry was really striking because I know you lived there. And that's also not really a tradition that is super well-represented in Western poetry.

MO: Partly, I was very fortunate that I knew Hiroaki Sato, who I think is the greatest translator of Japanese poetry, alive, and so, I went back even to Japan with he and a group of people to do a poetry festival at one point, with a mix of other Japanese poets. So through him, and through having lived in Japan, I knew just enough Japanese poetry and what he was translating. I love Japanese poetry. And Chinese poetry too. Tu Fu is like my favorite poet on earth.[8]

Tu Fu is just so, from the heart, so immediate in his circumstances—tons of war going on while he was alive. And his sense of nature, and what happens between people and two people, just villagers, during

[8] From the back cover of *Japanese Women Poets: An Anthology* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2008): "Hiroaki Sato, the eminent writer, editor, and translator, is a past winner of the PEN America translation prize and the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission's literary translation award."

wars, during those wars, and his own situation where he was swept off into the wars for years and years and thinking about his family and there was no communication. But he just has such a sense too of the beauty of the country, even in the wake of all that. And he could say the most desperate things with such feeling, yet they're not a complaint. It's just an observation but with feeling. Really, an amazing ability to portray reality and see the beauty and the horror, and just leave you with this lyrical feeling, it's almost indescribable. Beautiful.

So Hiroaki translated most of the translations, I think, that are in *Telephone*. He became a friend, so I would just say, "I'm doing a new issue, do you want to translate this," or "have you got a translation you want to put it in," or things like that. He did a lot of work with the *Chicago Review*, and he has a great book out called *From the Country of Eight Islands* that covers the whole history of Japanese poetry and is fantastic.[9] He has another title out too, that's all Japanese women poets from the beginning, *Japanese Women Poets: An Anthology*.[10] He should be more famous, he's fantastic. And just labor of love, translating these tremendous works. He's done a lot.

MCK: Did you pick up your love of Japanese poetry while you were over there, teaching English, or did it develop through your reading?

MO: I'd already been reading a lot, especially of Chinese poetry, and haiku, some Japanese, so I already loved that kind of poetry, actually.

But the great thing too about being in Japan is that when people would get together for a dinner or something, everyone would recite haiku or make up haiku. It was just part of the culture. You'd sit around and you'd make up haiku around the room. You'd never see that here.

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[9] *From the Country of Eight Islands: An Anthology of Japanese Poetry*. Edited and translated by Hiroaki Sato and Burton Watson, with an introduction by Thomas Rimer, associate editor Robert Fagan. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981.
[10] See footnote 8.

I think, or I just feel like in countries like Japan, when I was living there—well it's such a beautiful country, I mean it is just ethereal, when you get out in the bamboo forests. And America is beautiful too, but not in the same way. There's this fragility that's just so beautiful, and somehow that seems part of the poetry and the poetry's part of that. But I just loved in Japan that people recited haiku all the time, and the average person would make a haiku up.

MCK: Maybe you got as close as one could get to that in the States with the community you were a part of.

MO: That's absolutely true. But we still never got a group of people together who would just—I mean, people would get together to write a collaboration specifically—but to just say at a dinner, let's all make up a haiku? No. It's a great idea, I should do that!

MCK: That's a really interesting distinction too, the idea of collaborating, or going around and sharing poetry as a sort of premeditated, written act as opposed to just composing what comes to mind, and having it be ephemeral in that way.

MO: Yeah, exactly, ephemeral. And to be unabashedly not embarrassed, you know, to just make up a poem. And I noticed that same thing about singing in Japan, everyone sang all the time. And I thought, in America we're all so self-conscious, and if somebody sings then somebody makes fun of them and we think, "ah, I sound terrible." We're only allowed to sing in the shower.

Just make up a poem and then it's here and it's gone. Just a very beautiful ease of expression.

MCK: Culturally in America, I feel like when you're young, you sing all the time, you dance, you write poetry and you draw all the time…

MO: Right, so creative.

MCK: You've raised a bunch of kids, you've probably noticed the point where they might say "I can't draw I'm not good at it" or "I can't sing I'm not good at it." You know what I mean? Something happens where…

MO: That's true. I went to parochial school all eight grades, except for one. We would go on the racetrack circuit during the summer, so sometimes we would get back late after school had already started. And one year, I don't know how it happened, we got back a little later—a couple weeks later than normal. So they'd given my place at the parochial school to another student! And I had to go to the public school. Well, first of all, I was way ahead of all the kids in the class. So that was nice! I was like "wow, I'm really pretty good!" [laughs] But the most beautiful thing happened during the second week. The teacher's name was Ms. Kellogg, I'll never forget her. She said, "okay, well, we're going to pass out crayons and we're gonna have art class." I was drawing and painting at that point, all the time, my whole thing was art, but we *never* had art in parochial school. The word never came up. So I literally almost fainted. I just sat in my chair like a zombie. "We're going to have *ART* in *CLASS*?" It was heaven. And every week we had art in class. It was great.

MCK: I can picture little Maureen…

MO: I was like, *WHAAAAT*? I was literally stunned. I mean, the parochial school never had any arts at all. Because it was hard math, arithmetic, writing. Tough. It put me ahead of the students in another way. But at what cost!

MCK: So what sort of things did you do in that amazing year of art classes at public school? Do you remember what you drew?

MO: I think I drew a lot of pictorial things in class. Because sometimes Ms. Kellogg would say, maybe we should try to make a drawing of what we're studying. I remember there was certainly a lot of California history. I recall doing more than one drawing of Father Junipero Serra standing in a Spanish style courtyard with cactus,

adobe houses, one or two burros, and a whitewashed adobe church—very California! I can't remember all those drawings or what happened to them. But I was always drawing because I really loved art.

MCK: Do you still draw or paint now?

MO: No, I don't. Because I just kind of brought it all into my writing, really. Although I've thought about it, but then I kind of over the years have so gravitated it into my writing that that's kind of my major creative outlet. Though it would be fun to just paint. Sometimes I draw, but just for the fun of it!

MCK: Could you say more about how painting and art go into your poetry? I could make a couple guesses, like the field of composition, but I'd love to hear you talk about it more.

MO: Since I started out painting, and then when I started writing, I think my writing was full of painterly descriptions. I think my take on the world is primarily visual, interested in shapes and colors, movement. This reminds me, I did an interview with Barbara Henning about *Erosion's Pull*.[11] She asked me about that, because a lot of the poems are very painterly. I think that's kind of how I see the world. More in colors and images and then that comes into my writing.

MCK: I know we've talked about how you view the page as purposeful—

MO: As though it were a canvas in a way. I love all the materials too of painting or drawing. I have tons of colored pencils and stuff, even though I hardly use them. I just have to have them!

[11] Barbara Henning. "A Telephone Interview with Maureen Owen on *Erosion's Pull*." *Talisman*, no. 35, Summer/Fall 2007, pp. 34-47.

MCK: Inspiration!

MO: Yeah! Sometimes if I'm taking notes, I'll just do it in colored pencil. Because it's so much prettier. And so I definitely see—take in the world in a kind of image-oriented conception, I think.

MCK: There's such a productive tension too, between taking in the world in a visual way. We've both talked about how we like to have no visual clutter, or kind of a clean way to focus, like if you see something over there that you need to square away—just the visual, and how that translates to language and environment.

MO: Yeah, I have to have a sense of order around me to work. Otherwise I just get up and start putting things in order.

MCK: Oh, I've got a deadline tomorrow? All of a sudden I'm really noticing the inside of the oven needs to be cleaned!

MO: I better clean out the refrigerator! So true.

MCK: I thought I'd ask you about *Phil Honey* and the Working Papers series—I'd love to know more about that.

MO: I've always been very interested in documenting things. So whenever I taught a workshop, like at St. Mark's, there would always be a little pamphlet made at the workshop. And we would work towards that during the workshop, and people would pick their best poems and put them in the pamphlet. Or we'd have a specific idea in the workshop, and we'd gather all the works together and make a pamphlet of that too: the Working Papers.[12] So I always did that. And

[12] *Working Papers* was an occasional publication started in a workshop Maureen Owen was teaching at the Poetry Project in 1981; later issues, between 1995 and 1996, had volume/issue numbering. Another workshop

when I taught at Naropa, because they have a really good recording studio there, I had the students record poems at the end, at the last two sessions of the workshop. So I have recordings of them. And that was especially nice because it gave them an opportunity to give a reading, kind of, and we just made enough copies of it just to give me one, and them one, and I think we gave one to the archives at Naropa.

But I think it's really important, for the students who were in the workshops at St. Mark's, and wherever I was teaching, to see their work in like a little magazine, and with everybody else's work. It gives a kind of solidification, a real object, that you can say: "oh, I did this, I did this workshop, and here's my poems." I think that's part of the writing is the completion, getting your work out. It doesn't do you any good to have it under your bed or wherever! [laughs]

MCK: Absolutely! So it sounds like the "Working Papers series"—and this is just the bibliographer in me—wasn't necessarily Telephone Books but it was a thing you were doing that was kind of simultaneous. It was a simultaneous energy.

MO: I love publishing. So whenever opportunity—you know, the workshop was another opportunity to publish a little Working Papers. I wish I kept them all, but I just have a smidgen of them. But they're a great archive of terrific poems.

MCK: I really love your idea about seeing your work in print as a completion of the process of the poem, and also seeing the importance of your work next to other peoples' work. That is crucial. Because I think your energy and your dedication to facilitating that, Maureen, is just very—it's like the full delight of being, like going to a dinner party where everyone knows and greets each other—the vibe I get with *Telephone* is that there was delight in just bringing everyone together in this way.

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publication, produced by the writers in Owen's Saturday Poetry Workshop, was *Times R Us* (with a backwards "R" in the title), from 1998 to 1999.

MO: I think that's true. And bringing all the work together, and having that, "we did this" kind of, completion. Like a work of art.

MCK: And to have students understand, too, that poetry is not just the thing that you do—"I made this perfect poem, look how shiny it is, it's related to me"—poems are part of constellations that everyone's involved in. That's my poetics, anyway. Your poems have meaning insofar as they're related to other peoples' poems. And poems go back to people.

MO: And they're not a closed organism. They're an opening organism. And in that way they can congregate, kind of.

MCK: It strikes me too that the whole history of printing, the idea is that when you print something, that really fixes it, fixes it to the page, makes it permanent. But as soon as you print something, that's when it starts to get messy and slippery, and become alive, and go where it needs to go.

MO: And I think too, I encouraged this in *Telephone* and in the workshops, you don't have to think of your poem as finished. Print it, see how it bounces, what people think, rewrite it. You can always change it. Not forever and ever, some people do that too much. But you don't have to think of it as a completely finished poem, really.

MCK: Takes the pressure off.

MO: And it also takes off the horrible inclination to make an ending to the poem. The thud! So many times you'll read a poem and it's so good, so airy, and then you get to the end you want to take those last four lines and throw them away.

MCK: This makes me wish I was in one of your workshops. How did you go about structuring them? Tell me about your teaching style.

MO: I did different things in different workshops. One workshop I taught at St. Mark's, I decided we would take *The New York Times*

every Sunday, bring it to class, and with black magic markers—I was inspired by…did you ever see that book, *Front Pages?* Just a gorgeous, monumental print book of an art project by artist Nancy Chunn.[13] She took—I think, she took just the first page of *The New York Times*, literally every day I believe, for a year, and did art on that page, changing it. She devised this whole incredible process where she had—because of the acid in the newspaper and such—she had to soak the paper in the bathtub first. The works in the book are fabulous. I wish I'd seen the original art exhibition. I was inspired by her to do this workshop, I thought, what a unique idea, amazing. So in the workshop we couldn't do a lot of graphic manipulation, but we would write poems. So I had people black out certain parts of the text, and be kind of loose and random about it, and see what you had left for a poem, or begin a poem and pull odd lines together. But not to be concerned so much about it making sense. So that was a great workshop, actually, we got some wonderfully strange and quirky poems out of that.

And then sometimes, I'd just teach a workshop by every week teaching a different poet. Or I'd have a kind of a theme for the overall workshop. Just a lot of different kinds of things. Keep it lively, you know. Especially if you're teaching a workshop, the kind of people who come to the workshop are people who have been writing a while. Especially true at St. Mark's. And they have a particular kind of poem that they write, and they write that poem over and over and over and over. So you just have to rip them out of their head, you know, and get them out of that poem. So I do a lot of things that are kind of scary, probably, to some people. Sometimes, if you're in New York especially, you can invite people to come and read, a couple of people during the period of the workshop, to inspire the participants too. There's so many things you can do. It's fun to teach a workshop.

[13] Originally conceptualized as an exhibition at Ronald Feldman Gallery, Nancy Chunn's *Front Pages* contains 366 works, spanning January 1 to December 31, 1996. The exhibition catalog was published by Rizzoli in 1997.

MCK: I feel like so much of teaching, like you're mentioning, is changing students' expectations of themselves and what they do. The story that they tell themselves about their own writing. The idea of working with language that is not your own, and editing it, or crossing it out…

MO: Yeah! Pull someone out of their vocabulary. Because there are so many words out there, we just don't use that many.

MCK: I remember taking poetry classes and starting to think more about poetry, and the revelation that you could do games, like Surrealist games, that you could find language in places like that.

MO: I've done that in workshops too, where you just have a collaborative poem, sort of surrealist, you pass it around folded, so no one can see what the others have written, then unfold the whole of it at the end—Exquisite Corpse kind of things. Those are really fun. And that's really good for people too, because it lets them see that disjointedness and yet how it works at the same time.

MCK: Did you ever do volunteering in schools [for the arts]?

MO: I worked at Poetry in the Schools, the grade schools, for poetry, with Poets & Writers. It was great. I love kids, they're the best. I'm sure you've read Kenneth Koch's books; he had two or three really great books out about how to teach poetry to schoolkids. He was genius at it, really good. But it's so fun, because kids just, have these great—well, like the poems in *Telephone*, the kids would just kind of come up with that. They wouldn't be sitting there trying to write a poem, they'd just say something and I'd say, that's fantastic! And I would write it down.

My youngest son, in I think third grade, maybe, had a teacher and she was really great. She had her mother, who was probably in her eighties or so, came into the classroom and on various days and she would (her mother) would sit down one on one with the students and have them tell her a story. And she had this old Underwood typewriter and

she would type up the story. And then my son or one of the other students would draw a picture of their story. And then they would make a little poster where the story typed out was on top and the picture was on the bottom. And those were so incredibly great. And she just typed whatever they told her. And those little stories were amazing!

MCK: Another bibliography question: can you tell me more about Patrick Owen's *Strange Rain*? It's a great title.

MO: Oh, that's by my son, Patrick. He was very artistic, acting in plays, writing, and loved film. He wrote *Strange Rain* in his teens. It's very intense and soulful, full of adolescent humor and wisdom. He created the manuscript and then we worked on the production together. I was very proud of his work, and he was teenage cool about it. [laughs] We mailed copies out to the Telephone list, he gave copies to friends, and we sent copies to family. It's a most impressive collection. An official Telephone title.

MCK: What advice would you give someone who is studying and trying to understand the era of poetry that you were involved in at St. Mark's, and your poetry?

MO: I'd just say immerse yourself in the writing that went on at that time. And interviews with people, that sort of thing. Letters, even, you know, if you find an archive with letters. To just get the feel of the environment of that particular time. That's true with anything, like Black Mountain. Read as much as you can and visually look at as much art as you can—especially the New York poets, they're so involved in art and that's another thing too. Probably another reason why I gravitated so happily into that group, because there's a great deal of art and a great deal of collaboration with artists and poets, and so I would just say look into all that as much as you can, and try to find ways to see some art from that period, and as much gossip stuff as you can find! That's always good! But yeah, things like that are the best way to feel the time, and the language at the time, and what was going on. Research what was going on in the city, the environment

they were in. And politically too, the Vietnam War, that all figured into it pretty heavily, peace marches. Try to get the whole picture. And then you get a lot more of the allusions to things that are in the poems that might not be so obvious.

MCK: And what advice would you give a publisher who is just starting out?

MO: Here's something I'll just flip into the front part of that. When people would ask me how to get started as poet, how to get their work out, I'd say publish a magazine. Because that puts you in connection and communication with so many people, and one thing builds on another. And people publish—maybe they're doing a little magazine, and they'll publish one of your poems there. So you have to kind of, like a tree root, grow out. But do something yourself, don't just sit there and send out poems because you could do that forever and not get anywhere.

MCK: You were a poet that became a publisher, that's just what happened. That was the logic there.

MO: Well, actually, I didn't think of that when I did it! But later I realized that's a very good thing to do. For a publisher, I would just say: find the work you like, go to a lot of readings and get out around the community as much as you can that you're interested in, and publish what you love. I would go to a reading and I would hear someone and think oh my god, that's such a great poet! Like Janine Pommy Vega, I heard her read and I was like, Ah! And she was barely published. And Yuki Hartman, also stunning, no books. Or Susan Howe, nothing.

MCK: That's solid advice on all fronts. I feel like you should always be figuring things out for yourself, but I love asking people…

MO: That's how you figure out things a lot of the time! I think most people are excited to talk with someone about that. To not be shy about it. People do tend to get shy about it. I think everyone is, really.

But that would be the advice to give to anybody younger, don't be shy about it! What's the worst that could happen? They could say: I don't want to talk about it. Okay.

MCK: Then you know what you already knew!

MO: Exactly! They're not going to poke you on the nose or anything!

[both laugh]

…As I said that, I thought, maybe!

One of my regrets is that I didn't realize what poets that I'd been reading before I came to New York were still alive, basically. That I could have gone—like Lorine Niedecker. I actually could have gone and met her. And I just, I didn't realize she was still alive! Somehow you're reading these magazines and books and you don't think that—people that you assume are dead, of course, many of them are, but a lot of them were alive. I'd just say talk to whomever. It's so good.

Postscript

MCK: What poems were you memorizing on that ironing board? I would love to know.

MO: Oh my god, let's see. In those days I loved Edna St. Vincent Millay, and I memorized a lot of Robert Frost, because of the rhyme. I loved e.e. cummings, Eleanor Wylie, oh gosh, just a ton of people, I can't even think right now. But all earlier poets, because that's when I was really young. I memorized the whole of "Renascence" by Millay—I don't know if I could remember it now. I kind of grew up in a house without any books, a Minnesota farm, but when I moved to California, through my mom I discovered the library, so we'd just check out tons of library books. It's a funny thing that I read poetry like crazy, probably drawn to it by my mom often reciting poems she'd memorized in high school; otherwise I just read stories about animals because I couldn't think of anything more boring than reading a story about a human being.

[both laugh]

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