

BORDERBLUR POETICS: INTERMEDIA AND AVANT-GARDISM IN CANADA, 1963-1988

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Kinetic Poetry

syntax equals the body structure.

—bpNichol (1982)

In 1982, Daphne Marlatt and George Bowering asked bpNichol to elaborate on a statement he had previously made in a 1978 interview in *Outposts* to the effect that “syntax equals the body structure.”¹ Admitting that his earlier statement was “over-condensed,” Nichol offered the following clarification:

I discovered—and this is what the statement comes out of—that emotionally and psychologically speaking we learn that we often armour the body, the easiest illustration of which is: if I live in a house with a low doorway, I’m probably going to end up walking like this a lot. (Hunching) I’ve seen tall people do this when they’ve lived in situations where the ceiling is low. You get an armouring of the body. I discovered that the order in which I wrote my poems allow certain contents in and keeps other contents out, i.e. the syntax that I choose, the way I tend to structure a piece, form per se, permits some contents and excludes others. So what I was trying to find, because that is part of a larger thing I’ve been working towards, is a way to increase my own formal range (something I’m still trying to do), and therefore not merely be stuck, shall we say, by the physical limitation of my body at that point, i.e. just because I’m walking around with my

shoulders up like this, if I can learn to relax I can see the world in a slightly different way and so on. If I can keep moving the structure of the poem around, hopefully I can encompass different realities and different ways of looking at things.²

Nichol's explanation articulates a relationship between the body, movement, spatial limits, and creative processes, or, as Bowering puts it, Nichol "replaced the syntax of the image," the foundation of modernism's imagist tradition, "with the syntax of the body."³ Nichol suggests that the body is shaped—*armoured*, to use his word—by a range of physical movements and extensions, and he uses this as an analogy for how the form of a poem shapes linguistic expression, limiting the extension of words in comparable ways. A traditional poetic form—say, a sonnet—is a type of poetic armour or container that manipulates linguistic content to make it fit within the poem, determining the language's movement, pattern, and flow. Nichol's poetic practice explores a wide range of poetic forms to extend the limits of his poetry. In other words, by employing and exploring manifold poetic structures, Nichol's poetry can be more expressive and expansive, and in the case of his kinetic poems, can invite the reader to engage with elements beyond language such as materials, bodies, movements, and sensations as though they are integral parts of the poem.

Nichol's comments to Marlatt and Bowering reveal a belief in the fundamental linkage between language, movement, and bodies. For Nichol, language instructs and influences the engagement of bodies in and with the world, shaping a person's understanding of and interactions with reality. We can interpret Nichol's suggestion that "syntax equals the body structure"⁴ as a rationalization for his indulgence in unconventional poetic forms; however, such an interpretation would regretfully elide the processual relationship between body and poetry that his statement effectively highlights. While concrete poetry and sound poetry situate combinations of visual, sonic, and linguistic media and forms, these poetries partially subordinate a more holistic engagement that includes the body's capacity for movement and physical sensation (though it should be noted that some sound poetry involves theatrical performances). As a result, the previous chapters have elided a plethora of unique and under-examined activities that emerged as part of borderblur in Canada and that often exceed representation on the page, the cassette, or the vinyl record. Along with Nichol, poets such as Steve McCaffery, Gerry

Shikatani, John Riddell, First Draft, and others pursued similar ideas, creating kinetic works that combine performance, installation, game making, and more to facilitate an inward turn toward the body's complexities. Thus, much like sound poets, they also challenge us to reconsider the production of literary culture since their work did not convey the conventional materiality that characterized Canada's burgeoning national literary economy at the time. Like the works discussed in previous chapters, kinetic poetry circulated outside of the mainstream via borderblur's network of provisional institutions, effectively turning away from the national scale.

Nichol and his peers published to bring a nascent Canadian avant-garde paratradition into existence, and they did so with the intention of creating a community for concrete and sound poetries as well as kinetic poetry—indeed, they explicitly called for the latter form on the front cover of *grOnk* in January 1967. I see kinetic poetics occurring at two main interfaces: first, the intimate and unconventional encounters with the codex, and second the semi-public encounter of the performance and installation, especially those that are immersive and interactive and supported mainly by a do-it-yourself (DIY), artist-driven culture. Focusing on these two types of encounters, this chapter examines how these poets continued to explore the possibilities of intermedial expression by attending to how bodies (the poet's body and the bodies of the audience members) figure in the poetry itself as a moving, feeling thing through performances and “happenings,” installations, site-specific and time-based works, interactive and game-like works, and interdisciplinary collaborations. The kinetic poem, perhaps more than any other form, most directly answers the question Nichol first posed in 1967: “how can the poet reach out and touch you physically as say the sculptor does by caressing you with objects you caress?”⁵ Nichol's sound poem “Pome Poem” (1982) conveys his commitment to linking the poem to the body, as when he chants, “What is a poem is inside of your body body body body,” and then proceeds to locate the poem in the eyes, toes, head, etc.⁶ Here, the invocation of “your” acknowledges that the poem structures both the poet and the audience.

With these characteristics (elaborated at greater length below), kinetic poetry formed one more aspect of the multi-faceted Canadian paratradition that this book outlines. If concrete poetry can be understood as a way of grappling with the conditions of visual media amid a rapidly technologizing consumerist society, then kinetic poetry also represents a turn away from those conditions in favour of the site-specific, localized workings of body and poem

in time and space. The body—the primary site of kinetic engagement—is also a site of subject formation, the underlying foundational point of Nichol’s concept of “armouring” (i.e., the subject and their relation to space literally, though not entirely, determines the shape and movement of the body and its relation to the world). Thus, in its effective blurring of life and art, the kinetic work of the borderblur poets can be critically figured as a response to the conditions of the electronic age—especially electronic mediation—while troubling the idea of literature as an expression of national identity. The audience’s physical experience of the work unfolds through their interactions with the poem, and the poem can only unfold (sometimes quite literally at times) in tandem with the audience’s physical movements. If, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Canada’s literary community was modernizing by finding words to express its own identity on the page and to distinguish itself from other developed literary traditions, the kinetic poet turned away from that project. Instead, it came to be grounded in the fleeting immediacy of the intimate encounter with the poem itself.

I come to this work with my own body, characterized by my own abilities, thus representing my own reading/interacting experience as an able-bodied person. My readings are not meant to be authoritative in the sense of setting forth a definitive experience of each poem; rather, in the spirit of the work, they seek to embody and reflect my own physical experiences, and for this reason they may very well differ from the readings of others. At times, especially for site-specific works such as installations and performances, I come to these works more speculatively, re-imagining and reconstructing those works through careful research and dialogue with the practitioners when possible. From here, I consider the relationship between the corporeally and materially focused work of borderblur and the movements, sensations, and physical feelings that a reader may experience during the process of reading/engaging. Since kinetic poetry, in a pre-digital context, is the least theorized of the intermedial poetries examined in this book, in this chapter I first establish a theoretical framework by outlining both the critical problems related to kinetics in poetic discourse and the theorists who are crucial to my understanding of this poetic. While I have thus far often relied on statements from the poets and artists themselves to provide a contextually based sense of how borderblur proliferated in Canada, I diverge slightly from that approach here since kinetic poets have produced fewer written statements on their work. With the theoretical framework established, I then offer a historical

survey highlighting the key nodes of international activity that have—inadvertently or not—affected and influenced the emergence of a kinetically focused poetic in Canada. The goal is to develop a sense of the international paratradition to which the Canadian context relates. I then map a network of activity in Canada, attending to relevant publishers, events, and organizations in an attempt to effectively capture the spirit of kinetic poetry in the English-Canadian context and to develop an acute sense of its proliferation. I conclude the chapter by looking at some illustrative works by such poets as Nichol, McCaffery, Michael Dean, First Draft, John Riddell, and Gerry Shikatani.

Toward a Theory of Kinetic Poetics

When compared to the other poetics explored in this book, kinetic poetry engages the body holistically. Sound and concrete poetry engage the body, but their domain is primarily the ocular and cochlear realms of human experience. Kinetic poetry necessarily foregrounds a different aspect of sensorial engagement: the somatic encounter with language and language's materials via the poem. Etymologically, in the Western tradition, the word "kinetic" comes from the Greek word κίνητικός, meaning "moving," and is defined more precisely as that which pertains or relates to motion.⁷ I welcome connotations of the word from sciences like kinesiology—that is, the study of bodily movements. Suzanne Zelazo's article on Nichol's bodily poetics and the female triathlete is a necessary precursor to this chapter, as she follows a similar discursive strain, examining Nichol's work from a bio-poetic critical perspective. Nichol, she writes, "emphasizes the body itself as a site of meaning and language as a site of sensation, thus generating an embodied poetics."⁸ And while I do not draw from Zelazo's discourse of mind and bodily experience to examine the bodied poetics in this chapter—preferring instead Brian Massumi's and Sara Ahmed's writings on movement, bodies, and culture—her work animates my considerations of kinetic poetics as a bodily and mobile poetic form.

Kinetics, as it relates to literary studies, is usually associated with "kinetic poetry," poetry wherein the words themselves are literally in motion. Kinetic poetry is a term almost exclusively ascribed to the poetic sub-genres of video poetry and digital poetry, which are enabled by the technological advances of transnational corporations like Apple and IBM. In both digital and video poetics, movement is abetted by the fact these types of poetry use film,

programming, or animation to capture and depict motion. Notable examples of this kind of work include Ana Maria Uribe's *Anipoems* (1997–2003), minimalist poems that extend the principles of 1950s modernist concrete poetry into cleanly constructed digital animations that blink, move, dissolve, transform, and shift in repeating structures; Jim Andrews's interactive poem "Seattle Drift" (1997), which investigates connections between the digital hyperlink, sado-masochism, and issues of pathway control in the digital environment; and, most relevant of course, is Nichol's *First Screening* (1984), which consists of a suite of twelve poems programmed in the Applesoft BASIC programming language on an Apple IIe computer.

My use of the term "kinetic," however, as one face of borderblur poetics, precedes digital contexts to examine poems that utilize movement as an essential part of the poetic encounter and thereby anticipate the prominence of digital tools. Returning to the basic definition of kinetics—as a pure movement—discursively re-engages the field of kinetic poetry to include works that require no electrical or digital interface (initiating a swerve from the electronic context to which so many of the poets discussed in this book responded). Doing so facilitates the inclusion of a plethora of texts, such as Nichol's flipbook poem *Wild Thing* (1967), wherein pages must be flipped in quick succession to see the movement of letter shapes, as well as several game-based works by John Riddell, like the Xeroxed book *A Game of Cards* (1985), which consists of image overlays to be cut out and applied to an existing deck of cards to include textual elements during play. The poets of the borderblur network, however, extended their concern for movement beyond the page and codex by composing performative works that similarly highlight movement and interactivity. McCaffery's 1985 piece *Renting an Apple*, for example, required participants to rent an apple for five dollars; it is a work that folds together textual references to both the Biblical mythology of Genesis and Swiss folk hero William Tell. The apple is accompanied by a choose-your-own-adventure-type pamphlet containing a series of possible performance scenarios that could be carried out with the newly leased piece of fruit. Each of these works—both codex-based and performative texts—exceeded the typical scope of traditional literary production and analysis, yet each foregrounds a linkage between language, language's materials, movement, and participatory interaction as integral parts of their composition.

However, while kinetic poetry is a poetry of movement, the very concept of movement invites us to consider a range of somatic registers. Kinetic poems

are time-based, interactive, immersive, and haptic. To unpack this expanded definition, I rely upon critical theorists such as Sara Ahmed, Brian Massumi, and Marshall McLuhan, whose writings help situate kinetics in the context of pre-digital poetics. Their understanding of these terms, as will be explained below, inform my thinking about kinetics and give rise to two fundamental questions: How do these poets prompt us to reconsider the limits of bodily sensation in literary texts? Moreover, what meaning is generated when the literary text—the physical materiality of the literary object or performance—emerges as part of a direct, bodily encounter with an audience? But before I seek answers to these questions, I will clarify two key terms—*touch* and *proprioception*. These have been usefully applied to discrete critical contexts, but less so in Canadian poetic discourse. And since they are at the core of my notion of a kinetic poetic, they bear some defining.

Touch is often conflated with tactility, the perception of an object (person or thing) through direct physical contact between the perceiving subject and the perceived object. This type of sensorial engagement can unfurl across at least two different planes of bodily experience. The first is that implied by the common usage of the term “touch,” which describes the physiological sensation (also known as tactility) that flashes through the body and nervous system when the skin comes into contact with textures, vibrations, and temperatures, also known as tactility. The second has to do with a more rarified use of the term, which I take up via McLuhan’s consideration of touch in *Understanding Media*, where he rhetorically inquires if touch is “not just skin in contact with *things*, but the very life of things in the *mind*?”⁹ McLuhan’s rhetorical question offers a metaphorical extension of the word “touch,” which invokes affect—to touch someone not just physically but also emotionally and psychically. My sense of touch, as part of pre-digital kinetic poetry, then, implies tactility but is not reduced to it; it involves the body without necessarily making a physical impression upon it (though physical impressions do at times occur).

Sara Ahmed articulates the political dimensions of touch in her book *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality* (2000). With concern for personal and political borders, Ahmed writes, “The skin allows us to consider how boundary-formation, the marking out of the lines of a body, involves an affectivity which already crosses the line. For if the skin is a border, then it is a *border that feels*.”¹⁰ She continues to point out that “while the skin appears to be the matter which separates the body, it rather allows us to think

of how the materialisation of bodies involves, not containment, but an affective opening out of bodies to other bodies.”¹¹ Though her writing focuses primarily upon the other produced by colonial logic, Ahmed recognizes that the skin itself, as malleable as it is, demarcates the body’s material and corporeal conditions—shape, size, position, and so on. The skin, for Ahmed, is a point of interface—an opening—between bodies, and between body and world: a “border that feels,” she says. In part, Ahmed’s discussion of the body’s border resonates with similar points made by Nichol in his description of body “armouring.” It is precisely the interface between the body and the poetic work that Nichol sought to blur with his slipcase *Journeying & the returns*. Nichol sought to directly engage the sensorial realm of touch to produce an opportunity for openness of the type Ahmed describes above. The poem offers a chance for commonality between the reader and poet through the physicality of engaging the work with movement and touch. The kinetic poem, then, when touched, is a zone of contact—a blurring of borders between bodies—from which a relationship and even sense of community can emerge.

Ahmed addresses touch and community in a subsequent book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2015), wherein she maintains that even in touch’s metaphorical sense—i.e., to stimulate someone not physically but emotionally and psychically—it creates social bonds. Ahmed traces the etymological root of the word “contingency,” which she recognizes has the “same root in Latin as the word ‘contact’ (Latin: *contingere*: *com*, with; *tangere*, to touch).”¹² She writes that

Contingency is linked in this way to the sociality of being “with” others, of getting close enough to touch. . . . So what attaches us, what *connects* us to this place or that place, to this other or that other is also what we find most touching; it is that which makes us feel. The differentiation between attachments allows us to align ourselves with some others and against other others in the very processes of turning and being turned, or moving towards and away from those we feel have caused our pleasure and pain.¹³

For Ahmed, whose thinking resonates with McLuhan’s point about touch in *Understanding Media*, contingency—as a form of physical contact or emotional touching—is what binds persons to places, things, and other persons. Touch allows a person to form an attraction (personal or political) to another,

or, conversely, they can be repelled by it. Hence, a poet like Nichol, and many borderblur poets who reject singular ideas of a poem's form, seek to offer as many pathways into and out of the poetic work as possible. In doing so, they open as many channels for communication, and offer the audience as many zones of contingency and attachment, as possible.

With touch comes another important conceptual consideration for this chapter, which is the individual's perception and awareness of their own body in both position and movement. This sense of awareness is commonly referred to as *proprioception*. Proprioception is similar to touch in the way that both terms describe the registration of sensation, a feeling or awareness that is external to language. Like touch, proprioception requires an engagement with the perceiving subject's body, but it is distinguished from touch by the fact that the actual interface of the perceiving subject and the perceived object need not make surface-to-surface contact. Referring to it as the unrecognized sixth sense, Massumi provides a succinct definition of proprioception; he suggests that proprioception is "defined as the sensibility proper to the muscles and ligaments as opposed to tactile sensibility (which is 'exteroceptive') and visceral sensibility (which is 'interoceptive')," and further that it "folds tactility into the body, enveloping the skin's contact with the external world in a dimension of medium depth: between epidermis and viscera."¹⁴ Lastly, for Massumi, "Proprioception is a self-referential sense, in that what it most directly registers are displacements of the parts of the body relative to each other."¹⁵ In other words, proprioception is a subject's inner sensibility of one's body in relation to its surroundings and movements—the subject's ability to sense the place or movement of a limb or digit, as well as the subject's ability to sense the body as it moves through space. For example, Nichol imagined a tall person who registers the height of a low-hanging ceiling by hunching as they move below it. This chapter's interest in proprioception, as a means of accessing and understanding the literary engagements of borderblur, is grounded in the way kinetic poetry makes us aware of the position and movement of the body—especially the "reader's" body—in the same way that touch makes us aware of the sensations at the literal zone of contact.

Proprioception, as it applies to borderblur, is fundamentally closer to the physiological usage of the term than previous literary uses (more on Charles Olson, poets affiliated with *TISH*, and their "proprioceptive writings" later in this chapter). The proprioceptive poetry of borderblur is less about the introspection of the writer and more about the poet's and audience's awareness of

their bodies in relation to the literary work, in essence how a literary work shapes, positions, and moves the body. Proprioception is essential to consider in any analysis of the performative works of the borderblur poets, especially those that are meant to provide an immersive experience for the audience, like Michael Dean's *The Imagination of Aldo Breun* or Gerry Shikatani's *Sans Titre*, both of which invite the audience into locations designed with specific attention to language, interaction, and space. In addition to the distinction between touch and proprioception, two other distinctions must be made. Kinetic poetry, understood here as a pre-digital creative mode, while it shares characteristics with breath poetics and embodied poetics, which emphasize the somatic registers as represented in writing, is nonetheless distinct from both modes.

Olson is an influential figure for proprioceptive writing and the concept he refers to as "composition by field," a poetry that relies on the typewriter and its capacities to express the poet's breath on the page. As Olson envisioned it, the idea of composition by field sought an expansion of poetic form that deviates from the traditional verse structures of previous centuries. Rather than sonnets and sestinas, Olson argued that "Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of *essential* use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings."¹⁶ The breath, then, rather than the structures of formally fixed poetry, becomes the guide to the visual movement of language on the page. The poet's breath is said to allow "*all* the speech-force of language back"¹⁷ into the poem. To do so, the breath of the poet is registered on the page by the typewriter. The typewriter, as a primary tool of the poet in the mid-twentieth century, often imprints the page using a monospace font, thus, if the "poet leaves a space as long as the phrase before it," writes Olson, "he means that space to be held, by the breath, an equal length of time."¹⁸ The typewriter, then, allows the poet to guide the reader's breathing through the lines of the poem. For Olson, breathing should only occur at the line break; thus, if lines and line breaks are shorter, then the reader breathes more rapidly. Likewise, if the space after the line break is long, the reader's breathing should be slowed down. The poem, guided by a poetics of breath, seeks the direct transference of the poet's living, breathing self onto the page. In this way, somatics are emphasized in the poetry, thus drawing it into proximity with what I am building as a definition for kinetic poetics. "Composition by field" might best be described as a proto-kinetic mode. In "composition by

field,” the poem is a metonymic representation of the poet’s body on the page as it engages the mechanical operations of analog writing technology. In that case, however, the reader of the poem, if they read the poem aloud and precisely, are partially recreating the author’s bodily processes, not their own. So, while this may appear kinetic in that it emphasizes physicality and visual movement, it is an author-driven experience, which differs from the openness of kinetic poetics as borderblur poets have realized it.

Likewise, embodied poetics denote poetries grounded in the somatic, but deviate from kinetic poetry in ways similar to “composition by field.” Embodied poetics, in this instance, refers to specific feminist poetic practices that emerged in the 1970s and ’80s in the writings of Nicole Brossard and Daphne Marlatt. Embodied poetics refers to the writing of a particular kind of body—women’s bodies. This movement in poetics, in part, developed from the 1976 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” by French critical theorist Hélène Cixous, wherein she proclaims, “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing.”¹⁹ Cixous’s call resonated with poets and critics in Canada, who took up this premise. Canadian critic Barbara Godard, for example, wrote her touchstone essay “Excentriques, Ex-centric, Avant-Garde: Women and Modernism in the Literatures of Canada” (1984), which describes what she calls *texte de femme* and employs specific adjectives to describe women’s writing. She calls it “diffuse, disorder[ed], circular, multiple, unpredictable, unstructured and uncensored.”²⁰ The question of how to write women’s bodies was by the late 1980s a contentious issue for many writers, including Daphne Marlatt, Lillian Allen, and Jeanette Armstrong, who debated how and why this writing must be done at the 1983 Women and Words/Les Femmes et les Mots conference. Embodied poetics, as a movement in Canada, developed concurrently with the activities of borderblur, and indeed in some cases crossed over into distinctively related poetic territories. However, embodied poetics is distinguished from kinetic poetry because, like “composition by field,” it is a *representation* of the body on the page in language. It captures the poet’s sense of the body in language, but it does not literally engage touch and the materiality of language. Embodied poetry may register the body in language, but it does not necessarily formulate a literal zone of contact by invoking touch, kinetics, or proprioception.

Each of these experiential constituents, and all of the nuance that must necessarily accompany these terms, inform kinetic poetry that emerged as part of the borderblur network. Kinetic poetry gestures toward language as it

encourages the reader's body to move, shape, and engender a physical awareness. This is a type of poetry that centres on a different type of output: that of the feeling that sends sensations to the surface of the skin, to the muscles, and relies upon specific positioning and movements as the core of interaction within the literary work. The process by which such engagement occurs—like concrete poetry and sound poetry—is a creative mode of literary output that purposefully subverts standard literary conventions such as grammar, syntax, spelling, narrative, and, at times, language itself by directly engaging the somatic realm of bodily movement. Just as concrete poetry is composed of the visual materials of language, and sound poetry is composed of the sonic materials of language, kinetic poetry is embedded within and around the poem, in its immediate materials, space, and time. Further, kinetic poetry is embedded within the poem's materials to produce tactile and embodied sensation: it is located within the movements and velocity that a poem requires of a body; in the awareness of a body and its muscles, tissues, and ligaments as it engages the literary object, performance, or space. Kinetic poetry is a poetry that directly impacts the body's relationship with language, materiality, and space, recognizing that a poem can be an open interface. In these ways, kinetic poetry is borderblur par excellence.

Before concluding this section, some initial concerns regarding kinetic poetry must be addressed. Critical discussions of poetry that can be located within a kinetic discourse—notably, the kinetic poetry of borderblur—risk falling into a variety of traps. The first is similar to the problem that I confronted with sound poetry: the problem of materiality. For example, the Four Horsemen's game "Andoas" (1979) was only released as a set of instructions in *Only Paper Today*. The game requires players to make their pieces and board themselves. Furthermore, a game like "Andoas" is entirely dependent upon the production of variable outcomes of the game itself, or in other words, how the players choose to pursue an end point (if they decide to pursue one at all). With four people simultaneously playing this literary game, the outcome can differ in dramatic ways, depending on whether or not the game is played co-operatively or competitively. A number of these works, too, are site-specific, such as the sporadic happenings put on by Ed Varney, Maxine Gadd, and Judith Copithorne in the early 1970s, Gerry Shikatani's performances in the 1980s, and Michael Dean's November 1981 installation *The Imagination of Aldo Breun*, which was part of *The Symposium of Linguistic Onto-Genetics*. These works can never be fully recreated outside of the small geographical

and temporal windows within which they were realized, and they exist now only on the periphery of Canadian literary culture; they are documented in books, periodicals, and online, recalled in essays or photo essays, and live on in the memories of performers and audience members. They are not materially, corporeally, or experientially accessible in the present moment.

While recognizing that these works cannot be returned to, and that there is no substitute for primary experience, this chapter relies on secondary materials. In some cases, carefully considered speculation is necessary for understanding these works. Furthermore, as with sound poetry, some literary objects, like Nichol's *Wild Thing*, are less accessible—available only from rare booksellers or institutional archives. Going forward, I am conscious of the complexity posed by these problems as I piece together the narrative and my accompanying criticism. More significantly, the limited availability of these works indicates a resistance to the commodification of the literary object, a necessary component of the CanLit Boom as a print-driven nationalist project. In this way, by keeping the poem enclosed, temporary, and immaterial, kinetic poetics necessarily elides any kind of national literary project and instead privileges the local, immediate, and minute.

Kinetic Art and Literature: Borderblur's Kinetic Context

From the early to mid-twentieth century, before borderblur was established as a paratradition in Canada, kinetics manifested as part of a diverse body of investigations into the promises of intermedial expression. As in the cases of concrete poetry and sound poetry, kinetic poetry emerged in Canada in dialogue—at times inadvertently so—with international nodes of poetic activity, many of which drew from avant-garde and intermedial paratraditions. In the found and ready-made sculptures of Marcel Duchamp, such as his *With Hidden Noise* (1916), a collaboration with Walter Arensberg made with twine, brass plates, long screws, engraved text, and a mysterious unknown object apprehended only by shaking the structure (locked inside of it by Arensberg); in the ever-shifting sculptures and “avant-gardening” of Ian Hamilton Finlay and his immersive poetic environment he called *Stony Path/Little Sparta* (1966/1983); in Brazilian avant-garde movements like the non-verbal extension of concrete poetics known as *poema processo*, grounded in the use of abstract signs, symbols, and geometric figures, and an emphasis on reader participation and collaboration; in the intermedial and participatory works of Fluxus artist Ben Vautier, especially his destructive artwork *Total Art*

Matchbox (1965); and in the participatory, instruction-based, and de-materialized works of conceptual art by Yoko Ono in her *Grapefruit* (1964), the tactile, kinetic, and proprioceptive aspects of language are vital factors of artistic and poetic experiment.

These nodes of poetic and artistic production—from Dada to conceptual art—provide convincing proof that kinetics, as McLuhan points out, has remained an abiding concern for writers and artists for well over a hundred years.²¹ I consider these works kinetic because these artists and poets made conscious efforts to explore the intersection where ergodic interaction and language meet. In one way or another, each of these movements or artists intersect with the discourse of the kinetic, and the ideas embedded within their works found their way into Canada by way of exhibitions, performances, and publications. However, the work championed by Black Mountain-affiliated poets such as Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, known as proprioceptive writing, explicitly affected the development of poetry on the Canadian West Coast. Recounting the work of Duncan, whose writing proved to be influential for the Vancouver editors of *TISH* magazine, Warren Tallman describes the proprioceptive writer as one who “sees the surrounding world in the midst of himself as subject.”²² Tallman further explains that “in the proprioceptive sentence SELF becomes the subject, the WRITING becomes all verb, and the OBJECT is life, to live.”²³ Proprioceptive writing, then, according to Tallman, is an arguably ego- and subject-centred adaptation of proprioception that circumvents the actual physiological dimension of the term. Proprioceptive writing, according to Tallman’s description, approximates confessional modes of writing wherein the I-voice of the poem represents the divulgence of a personal, subjective account of that subject’s experience in the world. It misconstrues the actual proprioceptive elements—namely, that proprioceptive writing is based on the subject-object relationship characterized by constant formation and re-formation. The writing is, in a way, documentation of this processual relationship.

Proprioception is actually more bodily than Tallman seems to recognize, though certainly no less egocentric, since the proprioceptive poem is often, though not always, subject-centred. These ideas are most clearly stated in Olson’s writing, both his essay “Projective Verse” (1950) and his manifesto “Proprioception” (1965). Olson introduced the idea of proprioception to North American literary communities, describing it as

the data of depth sensibility/the “body” of us as
object which spontaneously or of its own order
produces experiences of, “depth” Viz
SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM
BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES.²⁴

This thinking about the body with its stimulations and tensions runs parallel to Olson’s poetics essay “Projective Verse,” published half a decade earlier, wherein he developed the idea of the “open poem.”

The “open poem” consists of “the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense,” and these elements “must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality; and that these elements are to be seen as creating the tensions of a poem just as totally as do those other objects create what we know as the world.”²⁵ Olson’s description of the poem here is bodily. It is a way of foregrounding the body—as a receptor and holder of these tensions—as the principal element of a poem’s composition, rather than rhyme or metre, common to lyric poetry, and the dominant poetic mode of the time, especially in Canada. What holds this together as a coherent work is the tension between the elements of the poem and the poem’s relation to the poet’s body: “the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE / the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE.”²⁶ Breathing is how the poem is truly projected into voice and onto the page: “It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends.”²⁷ Therefore, the poet is a receptor of sensations from the world who then engages and projects those sensations in language and breath back out into the world in a poem, organized by the proprioceptive processes of the body: “SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM / BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES.”²⁸

Duncan’s and Olson’s writings—especially their proprioceptive works—were, as noted earlier in this book, influential for the Vancouver poets who gathered around *TISH*. It was Duncan who prompted the young undergraduates to adopt the name *TISH*, an anagram of “shit,” as the title of their publication. Duncan suggested the name because archaeologists “had no idea what the people were eating except in those few fossilized remains [i.e., of feces].”²⁹ The fossil conjures images of excess (bodily waste) but also fertility

and growth; it is a deposit from a previous existence. The poem, for *TISH* poets, is a product of particular genealogies and results from consumption. The bodily connotations of the name also correspond to Olson's notion of "projective verse." The newsletter served as a means of projecting the ideas, feelings, and experiences of these young UBC undergraduates out into the world, again corresponding to bodily processes of consumption and excretion. George Bowering's poem "Poet as Projector" provides the best evidence of Olson's influence on the *TISH* poets: "I do not interpret, / I switch on & I switch out, / I enlarge the film, / my latent image of all phenomena."³⁰ These lines are representative of *TISH*'s adoption of Black Mountain poetics, which emphasizes non-lyrical modes of writing, the page as an open field.

The activities of the *TISH* poets draw us back into proximity with borderblur. For Nichol, these poets served as a foundational foil for his own work, which he developed more intensively in relation to *blewointment*. In 1974, he told Nicette Jukelevics that when he was living in Vancouver he was

sitting in on a bunch of the workshops that some people from *Tish* were conducting, heavy discussions about the relationship of form and content. At that time this was very new to me, I used to sit there and shudder at the implications of what was discussed. Anyway, this opened up another dimension for me. And when bissett once again came out with the *Blew Ointment* issues, I got a sense of inspiration, the kind of inspiration that comes from a person who is also interested in the same thing, the inspiration of somebody communicating exactly what you are interested in and are doing.³¹

Nichol's comments remind us of the beginnings of borderblur, of bissett and *blewointment*, and the poetics that emerged as they developed a genuinely kinetic poetic that was influenced by both Canadian and non-Canadian texts but was never derivative of those preceding and concurrent influential forms.

International movements like concrete poetry, intermedia, conceptual art, and performance art impacted Canadian arts and culture in various ways. Robust studies and histories offered in books such as *Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada, 1965–1980*, edited by Arnold Grant and Karen Henry (2012); *Caught in the Act: An Anthology of Performance Art*, edited by Tanya Mars and Johanna Householder (2004); *Performance au/in Canada*,

1970–1990, edited by Alain-Martin Richard and Clive Robertson (1991); and online projects like *Ruins in Process: Vancouver Art in the Sixties*, document some of the ways these international movements influenced certain artistic and poetic communities in Canada. Kinetic poetry in Canada emerged both as a successor to and in concert with these poetic and artistic investigations. However, kinetic poetry has not been treated to the sort of critical, historical, and theoretical writings that stimulated the proliferation of other movements in Canada. In some cases, Canada is among the many locations where these movements flourished (intermedia, performance art, conceptual art), while in other cases, earlier movements prefigured Canadian arts and literary culture, as was the case with Dada in its historical incarnation. The emergence of kinetic poetry as a strain of borderblur had no single catalyst—no event, author, or manifesto. It did not result from the arrival of another art or literary movement. Rather, kinetic poetry—much like concrete and sound poetry—emerged independently in Canada, growing rhizomatically before it was enmeshed within a national and international nexus of art and literary cultures.

It could be said that all of the previously mentioned movements, in some way or another, influenced the development of kinetic poetry in Canada. These other poetic and artistic practices, however, tend to privilege one type of engagement over another: kinetic works of art or performance tend to privilege the somatic over the semantic; likewise, the poetics that approximate kinetic modes are more interested in linguistic expression than somatic expression (as in the case of proprioceptive writing). In each case, language and kinetics are not wholly fused to create what I refer to as a kinetic poetry wherein language, language materials, and the body are intricately bound up in the work. The kinetic poetry of borderblur marks a departure from its historical predecessors in the way that the poets in question brought together these elements to create poetry that breaks down the wall between poet and audience, language, and body.

For the kinetic poetry of borderblur, the wall separating bodies and language was dissolved thanks to a particular and unique relationship that these poets had with media and technology—as was true of concrete poetry and sound poetry. McCaffery argues that sound poetry emerged again in the 1950s in response to electroacoustic voice technologies and the tape machine.³² Likewise, some kinetic poetry emerged in Canada because of the increased access to print materials and technologies. Canadian poets seized upon newly accessible “portable, inexpensive electric or electronic equipment,” which not

only permitted a “multiplicity of aesthetic systems, or even value systems,” but also gave poets and artists opportunities to more deeply engage with the materials of their work, which allowed them to imagine new possibilities for the way a text can move and feel.³³ In their published works, they therefore paid close attention to layout, design, typography, paper type, binding, and so on. All of these factors became a meaningful part of the process of poetic production since much of the work emanating from the Canadian borderblur network was produced and circulated by provisional institutions. As such, the poet’s body (labour) and mind (intellect) were perhaps more deeply embedded or entangled within their work. The bodies of poet and audience also became more closely approximated to the language and the materiality of this work, thus closing the distance between poet, poem, and audience. It was this access to and control over these new media technologies, fused with a DIY sensibility, that prompted the proliferation of kinetic poetry. To gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between media and the emergence of kinetic poetry—and to begin accounting for the development of kinetic poetics in a Canadian context—I turn again to McLuhan, whose writings profoundly influenced the generation of poets covered in this book, and these writings include meditations on touch and extension.

McLuhan’s theories of media extension gesture toward kinetic discourse, which—inadvertently or not—underpins his critical considerations of the interface between humans and technologies that are external to the human body. McLuhan’s claim that “all media are extensions of our own bodies and senses”³⁴ is based on a deceptively simple premise. He asserts that media is a means by which humans extend their abilities. The telephone augments human communication by allowing it to take place at a faster speed and across longer distances. By using the telephone, humans can receive linguistic (and extralinguistic) data that stimulates the mind and body in various ways, depending upon how the individual’s feelings unfold from the interaction. In this way, the functional capacities of media literally extend the range of human input and output.

But McLuhan’s writings on media as an extension of humans’ communicative abilities can also sustain a more complex reading, at which point they appear almost like science fiction. For McLuhan, the significance of media during the electric age exceeds its utilitarian function to become a corporeal prosthetic with a direct impact on the kinetic realms, including touch and proprioception. The media technologies that humans employ in

their day-to-day lives directly correspond not just to the outward extension of the human body, nor to the inward reception of stimulation: rather, media directly influences and shapes the physical and psychic life of humans. This is an idea that underpins much of McLuhan's writing, spelled out as early as 1951 in his book *The Mechanical Bride*, wherein, anticipating technological singularity, he anxiously claims that "technology is an abstract tyrant that carries its ravages into deeper recesses of the psyche,"³⁵ and further that "as terrified men once got ritually and psychologically into animals, so we already have gone far to assume and to propagate the behaviour mechanisms of the machines that frighten us and overpower us."³⁶ In this case, McLuhan's consideration of technology describes the modulating capacities of media—how a medium attaches itself, parasite-like, to the body of the user and influences that user's experience of tactility, movement, and proprioception. In this way, McLuhan conceives of media and the body much in the same way that Nichol conceives of a poem's form as "armour."

McLuhan maintains his position on media as a literal extension of the human body in later works like *The Medium Is the Massage* (1967). In this text, McLuhan swerves from the sort of idiosyncratic academic writing found in *The Mechanical Bride* and instead issues a series of provocative statements—"The wheel . . . is an extension of the foot,"³⁷ "clothing, an extension of the skin,"³⁸ and "electric circuitry, an extension of the central nervous system"³⁹—that, in a collagist fashion, are placed against images. The title, *The Medium Is the Massage*, foregrounds the inherent kinetic quality of media by invoking massage—an engagement with the muscles and tissues of the body via flesh-to-flesh contact that, if successful, has tremendous (if only temporary) effects on the body's feeling and composure. Indeed, the use of media is a similarly intimate affair. For example, a telephone requires a short range of finger motions across a number pad (or along a rotary dial, or today a touch screen) in quick succession to achieve aural contact with another person on the other end of the line. Thus, to use that media, the body must always satisfy a predetermined program of kinetic engagements—primarily movements and tactile sensations—that are encoded within the medium. As the body repeats these movements, they become embedded within the body in what is commonly referred to as muscle memory. Likewise, before the rise of mobile devices, a film required viewers to position their bodies toward a screen and in a position comfortable enough, typically, to remain stationary for longer than an hour. Within the folds of this medium, one should not

move, otherwise the film will be missed. Each of these examples demands the body to touch, move, and perceive actions in particular ways and at particular speeds in order for the medium to be engaged. These engagements occurring on the level of kinetics (with touch and proprioception) shape the individual and a community's sense of their world.

With the advent of telecommunication technologies came what McLuhan famously referred to as the global village, a shrinking sense of the distance between persons as well as an increased sense of alienation, since these communications mediate interpersonal experiences, establishing a veil or barrier between one person and another. In this way, McLuhan presciently teased out a core condition of the postmodern age—an increase in the means of communication coupled with an increasing sense of alienation. McLuhan takes note of this problem in *Understanding Media*: “Our mechanical technologies for extending and separating the functions of our physical beings have brought us near to a state of disintegration by putting us out of touch with ourselves” (and, I would add, with one another).⁴⁰ For McLuhan, the telephone and tape machine, for example, offer a means of communication, but in a disembodied form. Thus, the possibility of a kinetic encounter with another person as part of a face-to-face meeting diminishes. Instead, this communicative process becomes a kinetic encounter with a non-human mechanism—a telephone, a radio, a book, a poem—thus denying possibilities for an imminent human community. In other words, communication is less intimate.

The problem McLuhan poses here is out of phase with other comments he makes regarding the emotional and psychic resonance of kinesis, or what he refers to as “the life of things in the *mind*.”⁴¹ This dissonance in McLuhan's thinking is not easily reconcilable, but it is crucial to keep both points in mind. McLuhan's point regarding the problems of disembodiment and technology highlights an anxiety or discomfort some people may have around the use of new communication technologies and the way these can change the relationship between materials and bodies as well as bodies and other bodies. This is an issue that the poets of the borderblur network addressed in their work in various ways. They sought to renegotiate the conditions governing kinetic encounters with the poem. By taking an interest in touch, this problem is partially solved. An investment in touch during the emergence of an internationalizing world is a means of healing the disintegrating self and subject; it is a means of reinstating a conscious, tactile connection between

people's inner and outer lives, a point of interface that McLuhan believes is significantly altered by the conditions of the electronic age.

In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan confirms that the artistic zeitgeist that informed borderblur was concerned with touch as a crucial part of day-to-day and artistic experience: "For more than a century now artists have tried to meet the challenge of the electric age by investing the tactile sense with the role of a nervous system for unifying all the others."⁴² For McLuhan, acknowledging touch is crucial during postmodernity's emergence. It is a period characterized by seemingly shrinking distances (thanks to the possibility of telecommunications technologies), but also by increasing mediation between bodies (as a result of those same telecommunications technologies). Understanding the impact of media and technology on the body in this way partly explains the impetus behind the concrete poetry and sound poetry of Canadian borderblur. They purposefully misuse their technologies—writing machines, books, tape machines, and language—to resist standardization, to resist the physical and psychic conditions imposed upon the body of the poet and the user. However, it also begins to explain the impetus for a whole range of related activities wherein the interface of work, with its materials and audience, is engaged on the kinetic level. In Canada, these ideas were the impetus for new and daring artistic endeavours, new communal formations, new publishing ventures, and new ways of blurring the borders between art and life.

Kinetics and Poetics in Canada

To move this discussion from the theoretical and conceptual planes to the level of practice, I return to bill bissett, whose early work, as I have mentioned elsewhere in this book, was influenced by McLuhan. bissett's *blewointment* magazine, for example, proved to be a significant forum for the development and popularization of kinetic poetry in Canada, notably for its collagist aesthetic. Michael Turner gestures toward *blewointment*'s tactile qualities as he recounts differences between *TISH* and *blewointment* in the early 1960s:

While the *TISH* newsletter was a clean and neatly-typed affair, filled with poems of a 1950s modernist bent, *blewointment*'s first issue emphasized the concrete nature of the written language, not just in its phonetically shortened form ("reveald") but through misspellings ("wgich," "abstracion"). Although the poems in *blewointment* also had a localized modernist sensibility, woven

between them were drawings and collage elements made up of newspaper clippings and handbills, many of which (“wgich”?) were supplied by bissett.⁴³

bissett’s collages are grounded in kinetic experience. For example, in some issues, extraneous materials are pasted into *blewointment* that are more diversely textured than the mimeographed pages; these include hand-painted scraps or pieces of paper that unfold and are handled differently. In some cases, a single issue of *blewointment* would be created using different types and sizes of paper, thus drawing the reader’s attention to the way the periodical is touched, held, and moved as they navigate the different paper sizes, flipping the issue around to see upside-down images or running their fingers along a differently textured page. Issues of *blewointment* sometimes varied in physical form quite dramatically. The “Fascist Court” special issue, for example, contains several different types of paper—including smaller papers that fold out, a thin red strip with a quote from John Lennon, and textured paper with a picture of bissett.

Due to the “makeshift conditions of production many of bissett’s original collages from these publications [*blewointment*] have been lost.”⁴⁴ However, bissett began experimenting with collagist techniques well before he launched *blewointment*. Keith Wallace, who organized an exhibition of West Coast assemblages entitled *Rezoning*, suggests that “for bissett, collage and assemblage is a visceral activity, an endeavor to become ‘one’ with the materials of his world.”⁴⁵ Like Duchamp before him, bissett employs a variety of at-hand materials to construct his work: one of his sculptural assemblages, for example, sees a wooden frame enclose a visual poem, and a torn scrap of printed media hanging in the top left corner while an *a*, *s*, and *c* rest in the bottom right corner. The wooden frame is backed by additional triangular materials, and overlaying the piece are the words “ice & cold storage.” *Vancouver Mainland Ice and Cold Storage* is also the name bissett gave to a book published in 1974 by Bob Cobbing’s Writer’s Forum, and a photograph of the assemblage was used for the cover.

bissett was also, for a time, affiliated with a loose organization of artists and poets in Vancouver, known as the Intermedia Society, whose work explored, researched, and promoted the immersive, interactive, proprioceptive possibilities of art and literature (as well as communal working). The group’s name was likely derived from Dick Higgins’s characterization of the

international Fluxus movement and other art forms that fall between media. In 1967, Intermedia leased a building that became a multi-purpose hub for like-minded Vancouver artists. It contained studios for film editing, sound recording, installations, dance, performance, and many other arts. bissett produced work there and performed with the Mandan Massacre. That this collective named themselves Intermedia once again gestures toward the cosmopolitan imagination of these artists and poets, who saw their work as located within cross-cultural currents of activity rather than solely growing out of or in response to the conditions of their immediate culture.

In addition to bissett, members of the Intermedia Society included some other and by now familiar names, including Judith Copithorne, Maxine Gadd, Ed Varney, Gregg Simpson, and Gerry Gilbert. Intermedia first formed to “discuss Marshall McLuhan’s theories on how electronic media, particularly television, was transforming our world into a ‘global village.’”⁴⁶ Stimulated by these ideas and committed to social action and change, the group formed in 1967 with the help of a \$40,000 Canada Council grant. The society centred around the creation of environments and participatory installations. Members made objects that were often used in interventions or as props for photographs. There was a great deal of interest in time-based projects, including film and video. Much of the activity was conceptual and process-oriented. The artworks were ephemeral and interpersonal in nature, involving performance, poetry, and dance.⁴⁷

While Intermedia initially formed around media and technology, kinetics—and general somatic stimuli—figured strongly in the work of these artists. Copithorne confirms this element: “I saw Intermedia as to do with process and variety. I saw Intermedia to be the human media, not the mechanical media.”⁴⁸ A great deal of the work that Intermedia produced incorporated the body in a variety of ways. In 1970, for their last show at the Vancouver Art Gallery, the group organized an installation entitled the *Dome Show*, which took place from 19 to 30 May. The show was organized around a series of geodesic domes, which Intermedia members were invited to build individually or communally. Various performances and events took place within the domes, including poetry readings, listening sessions, and musical performances. The *Dome Show* hinged on process-oriented and temporally based experiences: “if you were present at a happening and were documenting, it meant you weren’t in the moment, and that wasn’t cool.”⁴⁹ Within a dome, then, the body—with

its interactions and reactions to the event and to the other bodies within that space—served as an integral part of the performance and reading.

Intermedia and *blewointment* were representative of the emergent countercultural movements that were sweeping across Canada during this period—which included DIY sensibilities, artistic autonomy, utopian political visions, collectivity, and drug use. Another common type of event that emerged as part of the counterculture is referred to as a “happening,” which is primarily associated with performance, improvisation, and participation. “Happenings” rely upon the energy between artist and audience and demand the audience to be fully present in the moment of the event. The *Dome Show* presented by Intermedia facilitated these types of events; however, they also occurred in less contrived settings. For example, poets Gadd, Varney, Gilbert, and Henry Rappaport staged happenings in front of unsuspecting students at UBC sometime in February 1970. Varney recalls what happened: “Gerry Gilbert, Henry Rappaport, Maxine Gadd and I did a free-wheeling poetry event which mostly consisted of us shouting our poems across the campus and making a lot of noise.”⁵⁰ After reading this, I recall my own experiences of disruption on university campuses—protests, performances, conflicts, parties—and how those moments quickly redefine my sense of the space and my awareness of my body within it. I can imagine a similar reaction if I were confronted by Gadd, Varney, and company roving across campus, shouting countercultural verse. As Varney tells it, the poetry reading was likely a spontaneous event, and hardly as contrived as some of the more elaborate poetic works examined in this chapter. However, this sort of happening emphasized a desire to create events that would fuse art and life and viscerally immerse people (whether they like it or not) into the flow of the performance.

Of course, kinetics was also explicitly foregrounded by the materiality of printed poetry during this time. Like *blewointment*, other periodicals like *grOnk* sought to publish work that fit into the category of kinetic poetry. In addition to foregrounding the physicality of the publications themselves, by creating unique literary objects of varying size, colour, and construction, *grOnk* was interested in poetry that engaged physicality. As stated on the cover of the very first issue of *grOnk*, published in 1967, the magazine was primarily interested in “concrete sound kinetic and related borderblur poetry,” and it remained a forum for this type of work until it ceased publication. These forums were crucial not only for the proliferation of kinetic poetry but also for its related somatic domains in Canada in general. As noted

earlier in this book, *grOnk* and Ganglia Press were poet-driven endeavours; the poets maintained an almost total control over their work. Of the many notable works of kinetic poetry published under the Ganglia Press moniker, Earle Birney's *pnomes jukollages and other stunzas* (1969) stands out. Similar to Nichol's *Journeying & the returns*, Birney's text was packaged in a white, 9-by-12-inch envelope. The individual pieces are placed loosely within the envelope and consist of various fold-outs, booklets, and sheets. Each work is unique, altering typical experiences of the literary object, as demonstrated by the multiple versions of "Like an Eddy," each of which requires different types of physical interaction to activate the text (more on this later).

Coach House Press began, like *blewointment*, Blew Ointment Press, Ganglia Press, and *grOnk*, with a commitment to experimentation in design. Founded in 1965 by printer Stan Bevington and designer Dennis Reid, Coach House Press has been described as "arguably the single most important publisher of experimental poetics during the 1970s and '80s."⁵¹ Coach House was driven by poets, including Wayne Clifford and Victor Coleman, and later, an editorial board including Nichol, Frank Davey, David Young, David McFadden, Michael Ondaatje, Linda Davey, Christopher Dewdney, and Sarah Sheard. Committed to small press literary culture, Coach House became a hub for innovative texts. In 1967, it published Nichol's *Journeying & the returns*, which is a "characteristic . . . [Coach House] combination of imaginative book design and innovative content."⁵² Like Birney's *pnomes jukollages and other stunzas*, Nichol's *Journeying* resisted the traditional codex form. Instead, it was published in a folder and consisted of a variety of materials including sheets, booklets, a perfect-bound book, and pieces of cardstock, each of which requires the reader to hold and move the unique materials differently. These works can be read like conventional books while others, like "Cold Mountain," must be folded and then burned, reminiscent of Vautier's *Total Art Matchbox*.

Underwhich Editions built on the Coach House spirit with its commitment to uniquely designed publications. For this reason, Underwhich uses the term "editions" rather than "press" because its editors were not solely interested in publishing print-based works like books, chapbooks, and pamphlets, but also published objects, audiotapes, and microfiche. Founded in 1979 by Dean, Dedora, Dutton, McCaffery, Nichol, Riddell, Steven Ross Smith, and Truhlar, Underwhich Editions was perhaps the foremost publisher of kinetic poetic works. Each editor was "given editorial independence



Figure 4.1: "Like an Eddy" by Earle Birney, 1969.

in a spirit of mutual trust & understanding of the underlying mandate,” and this resulted in an explosion of “action with an initial series of smaller works from almost all editors, each given the physical attention they deserved to become fully-realized works of book art, in addition to their values as literary artefacts.”⁵³ Numerous significant kinetic works emerged from Underwhich, including several literary-based games by Riddell, such as *A Game of Cards* (1985) and *d’Art Board* (1986). Each of these texts not only resists the standard codex format for literature but also encourages readers to engage the poem through unconventional means and media. To engage Riddell’s game-based works, one must follow his instructions. Likewise, to read Truhlar’s *Five on Fiche* (1980) today, one must travel to the library to use the microfiche machine, which requires a whole different series of movements when compared to the standard movements of flipping the pages of a book.

Combined, these nodes variously emphasize the different kinetic dimensions of literature that assists in the proliferation of art and poetry by closing the gap between poetry, poet, and audience. These poets, artists, thinkers, and organizers developed publications, events, performances, and happenings to emphasize process, participation, response, movement, materiality, awareness, and the body. These works were part of an expanded program of artistic and poetic approaches that sought to reinvent the state of art and poetry so as to shift it from a static image on the page or invisible sound toward physical action, wherein the particular work in question is engaged by the body. This is a significant gesture in itself since these literary works reconfigure the typical interaction between reader and poem with a less common emphasis on the physicality of hands, fingers, muscle movements, etc. Furthermore, these works demand that the audience consider their role in the meaning-making process and determine how the suspense of the work unfolds from their interaction with it and how it will further unfold into their bodily and material lives. Placing this role upon the audience is crucial since many of the conditions of the electronic age, especially the emergence of new mediating technologies, increase the distance between subjects and the surrounding world, thus disconnecting them from the material conditions of their lives.

Extending the Codex

Consisting of a perfect-bound book of poems, a 7-1/4-inch disc entitled *Borders*, and a variety of poems on sheets and in pamphlets, chapbooks,

and flipbooks, Nichol's *Journeying & the returns* (1967) contains several formidable examples of kinetic poetry. All of these materials are encased within a pale mauve folder with a blue cover image on one side and Nichol's "Statement" on the other. The "Statement," a central document in the development of borderblur, situates *Journeying* as a kinetic work: "how can the poet reach out and touch you physically as say the sculptor does by caressing you with objects you caress?" he asks, to which he answers, "only if he drops the barriers."⁵⁴ To do so, Nichol explicitly created a work wherein the barriers between reader and poem are made apparent. Each of the works in *Journeying* requests a specific engagement from the reader, breaking down the barrier between poem and reader and treating the actual material container of the poem as part of the work. *Journeying* is a collection that anticipates Ahmed's notion of a "border that feels." These works engage the epidermal boundary with varying textures and movements, and even convey smell.

The slipcase foregrounds Nichol's search for a way to dissolve barriers between the poet, the poem, and the reader. The mauve paper that is used to create the folder is subtly dimpled, drawing attention to its texture. The collection within comprises several paper-based materials containing a variety of textures—smooth, glossy cardstock; laid linen paper with horizontal lines; pages with smooth cut edges; pages with deckled edges; and reflective cardstock. Each of the pieces varies in colour too—olive, orange, cream, metallic, etc. In each case, the poem-object offers a different texture that uniquely stimulates the reader's hands, and this contrast is what highlights the unique feeling of each piece. In the version of *Journeying* I consulted at the University of Toronto's Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, an envelope contains all of the poem-objects; the words "Letters Home" are printed across it in a handwritten script, signifying an attempt to reach out and communicate with a distant but familiar place.

While longing and desire are emotions that inform the work as a whole—especially Nichol's desire to engage the reader on a somatic level—this is explicitly foregrounded in Nichol's miniature chapbook "Cold Mountain," wherein the poem depicts the speaker's journey away from and return to their lover. Described as "a kinetic poem/sculpt for eventual destruction [*sic*]," the booklet consists of pages of various sizes and heights, thereby forming a staircase-like structure.⁵⁵ As the reader flips these pages, a new sequence of words appears describing the journey of the speaker. The first sequence is "GO / TO / COLD / MOUNTAIN," which, after the first page is flipped, changes to "GO

/ TO / COLD / & high,” which then changes to “GO / TO / reach you / i must,” and then finally, “GO / from / her side.”⁵⁶ At this last sequence, the reader reaches the top of the Cold Mountain and then eventually returns “home / in pain,” “COLD / to her arms,” which signifies the end of the speaker’s “RETURN / FROM / COLD / MOUNTAIN.”⁵⁷ With its unique design, the booklet’s materials assist in representing the ascent and descent of the speaker on their journey, as they long for a loved one.

By the end of “Cold Mountain,” the speaker has returned cold, resting in his/her lover’s arms. This can only be resolved one way: to be warmed by a fire. The back of the booklet contains “assembly instructions” to prepare the reader for warmth:

- 1) Curl the covers in behind the text
- 2) Curl the text in individually
- 3) Uncurl the covers
- 4) Drop a lit match down the centre cone (optional step)⁵⁸

Recalling Fluxus pieces like Ben Vautier’s *Total Art Matchbox*, Nichol’s “optional step” is to burn the booklet in an act of creative destruction to warm the reader. jwcurry notes on his Flickr page that few people have probably burned their copies of “Cold Mountain.” He is among the few who have. While testing exactly how the piece would burn, curry remarks that it “turns out to be a very controlled burn, the central tube channelling the flame into a volcanic gout, the others following along as it spread from the bottom out until it was all consumed.”⁵⁹ Nichol, then, according to curry’s comments, consciously created “Cold Mountain” to present a distinctive aesthetic experience that hinges on the materials of the work: flame, paper, and ink.⁶⁰ The flame moves and appears to follow a specific trajectory through the paper and ink as it produces heat and brings warmth to the skin, a remedy to the cold, mountainous journey depicted by language via the movement of the booklet. The burning would also produce smoke and accompanying smells, likely engaging the reader’s olfactory senses (another step in breaking down the barrier between poet, poem, and the reader). In this way, “Cold Mountain” is a

poem that touches both the inside and outside of the reader, using movement, combustion, and entropy to articulate longing and regained comfort.

Another significant piece from Nichol's *Journeying*, entitled "bp," engages similar ideas as a poem-object that seeks to break down the barrier between reader, poet, and poem. "bp" is a minimalist poem-object consisting of Nichol's two initials, *b* and *p*, joined together to form a single cut-out. The cut-out is made using paper with a reflective finish and a matte black backing—as though it were a mirror. On the one hand, the piece looks like a celebration of the author, with its a bold and flashy signature that accompanies the other texts and announces the author's presence. In this way, perhaps the piece is a reminder to the reader that there is a body and person intimately related to the texts that they hold. More significantly, however, this deceptively simple piece effectively blurs the borders between poet, poem, and reader. When looking directly at the piece of paper, the reader's face is reflected hazily back at them. When I look at it, for example, I see my nose, mouth, eyes, and glasses: in effect, I see what I recognize as myself in "bp," but I also see myself as the cut-out of the letters *b* and *p*, which serve to shape the image of my reflection. Within the piece, I am intricately bound with Nichol. In so doing, the work is reflective of an interlinked relationship between the poem, poet, and reader, and, further, of how a reader's consciousness, at the moment of consuming this work, is formed within the intersection of these three elements. As such, the work gestures toward a community comprised of reader, poet, world, and poem—all are simultaneously present within one another.

In addition to a shared focus on their materiality, both poems are also representative of Nichol's interest in the Japanese haiku form, which features most prominently in his translations of Basho's "Frog Poem" (ca. 1680). Like haiku, Nichol's "bp" and "Cold Mountain" embrace minimalist diction to offer a careful meditation on language in order to generate feeling from the poems' specific imagery, rather than offer any explicit statements of feeling. To this end, Nichol primarily focuses on the material aspects of the texts. Nichol's *Journeying* radically brings the material world and its conditions back into the reader's grasp. Both "bp" and "Cold Mountain" draw attention to the poem as *techné*, highlighting the relationship between material and reader, and seeking to close the distance between them. "Cold Mountain," a booklet about the labour of travelling vast distances, reminds its readers that they must knowingly traverse the material realm to reduce feelings of alienation in order to find comfort again. Likewise, the smooth surface of "bp"

offers an analogy between the ways that materials are inserted into human life without friction and are thereby normalized, sometimes to our detriment (as in the case with some communications technologies). “bp” is a poem that emphasizes our place within material systems, reminding us of our power despite the seeming inextricability of new technologies.

Techné and kinesis are also critical elements in Earle Birney’s interactive work *pnomes jukollages and other stanzas* (1969), issued by Ganglia Press. While Birney may have been part of an established generation of poets, and was not at first interested in the experimental tactics of the borderblur group, *pnomes jukollages and other stanzas* offers an exemplary representation of the visual, sonic, and kinetic concerns of the borderblur poets. This is due, in part, to Nichol’s influence. Nichol designed the work, and, like some of his own publications, he encased Birney’s *pnomes* in an envelope containing a variety of materials. The envelope is about 9-by-12-inches in size, with the title and Birney’s name boldly printed on its face. The printed side of the edition at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, however, is upside down. If you flip the envelope over from right to left (like the page of a book), you have to rotate the envelope 180 degrees to access the flap and remove the envelope’s contents. Having been printed this way, *pnomes* resists a reader’s intuition to flip print media from right to left, as readers normally do with books. Thus, Birney’s collection invites the reader to become immediately conscious of the object they are engaging: to be aware of the way the envelope must be moved, foregrounding the materiality and kinetic aspects of the work.

Birney’s *pnomes* begins with the materials: there are various paper types and sizes that vary in texture and colour: creamy cardstock for one version of “Like an Eddy,” with thinner white paper used for the second version; long, bright yellow sheets for a horizontally printed and staple-bound “Alaska Passage”; a purple folder containing sound and visual poems; and continuous-feed computer paper with perforated edges for “Space Conquest: Computer Poem.” Each piece requires a different type of engagement: the centre-folded computer poem, for example, must be opened to reveal a short, three-stanza poem on the large sheet of lined paper; “Alaska Passage” is staple-bound to be read like a typical chapbook, flipping pages left to right; and “Architecture,” while it is folded and stapled, must be unfolded to read the poems tucked inside of it. Each of these unique pieces signals a move away from the conventions of the codex, using paper and binding to become not just a by-product of the poem, but part of the poem itself. Each poem, with

their emphases on diverse materials and engagements, brings the reader closer as they more consciously consider the movements and gestures required to read the work.

Of the many pieces included in *pnomes*, most striking are the two versions of the kinetic poem “Like an Eddy” (see figure 4.1). Each version requires a specific type of movement in order for the work to be engaged: one must be rotated, while the other must be cut out and assembled to move by itself. The first is printed on a flat sheet of paper with hand-written text in a spiral. Birney writes, “Like an eddy my words turn about your bright rock,” invoking the relationship between reader and author.⁶¹ The piece must be rotated to be read so that the reader’s hands enact the “eddy” motion of the poem. The “bright rock” belonging to the reader (implied by the “you”), is, in fact, the body. The reader must therefore move their hands in half-rotations, as the edges of the paper are passed between each hand. A similar idea is manifested in the second version of the poem (a collaboration with Andrew Suknaski), which is printed on a flat sheet, and though it does not have instructions to cut the mobile out, it gestures toward that action. Once excised, the work would be hung like a mobile. In this version, however, the language is altered slightly. Instead of “turn about,” Birney writes that it will “move about,” suggesting that the mobile may not rotate, but it will move. The mobile hangs in suspension, moving as air passes through it, or someone pushes it with their hand. The “bright rock,” in this version, would describe any person below the mobile, looking into it. As a pair, each version of the work offers a meditation on human agency and kinetics. The first version looks to the reader as the point of contact who initiates the poem, while the second is more esoteric, indicating that the poem has a life of its own—its own form of agency and activity in the world.

Like Nichol and Birney, Ottawa-based collective First Draft sought to produce poetic works that exceeded conventional definitions of the poem while also responding to the conditions of the electric age. At times, they would use the phrase “wordmusic” to describe their work, and other times they would call it “sound poetry.” They also used the term “intermedia,” perhaps in reference to Higgins’s characterization of art that falls between media—the same term that informs this book. Indeed, their performances occupy the in-between space of poetry reading, theatre, and musical performance. While the group’s shows engaged a multiplicity of sensorial receptors at once (especially sound and vision), these were not necessarily kinetic works.

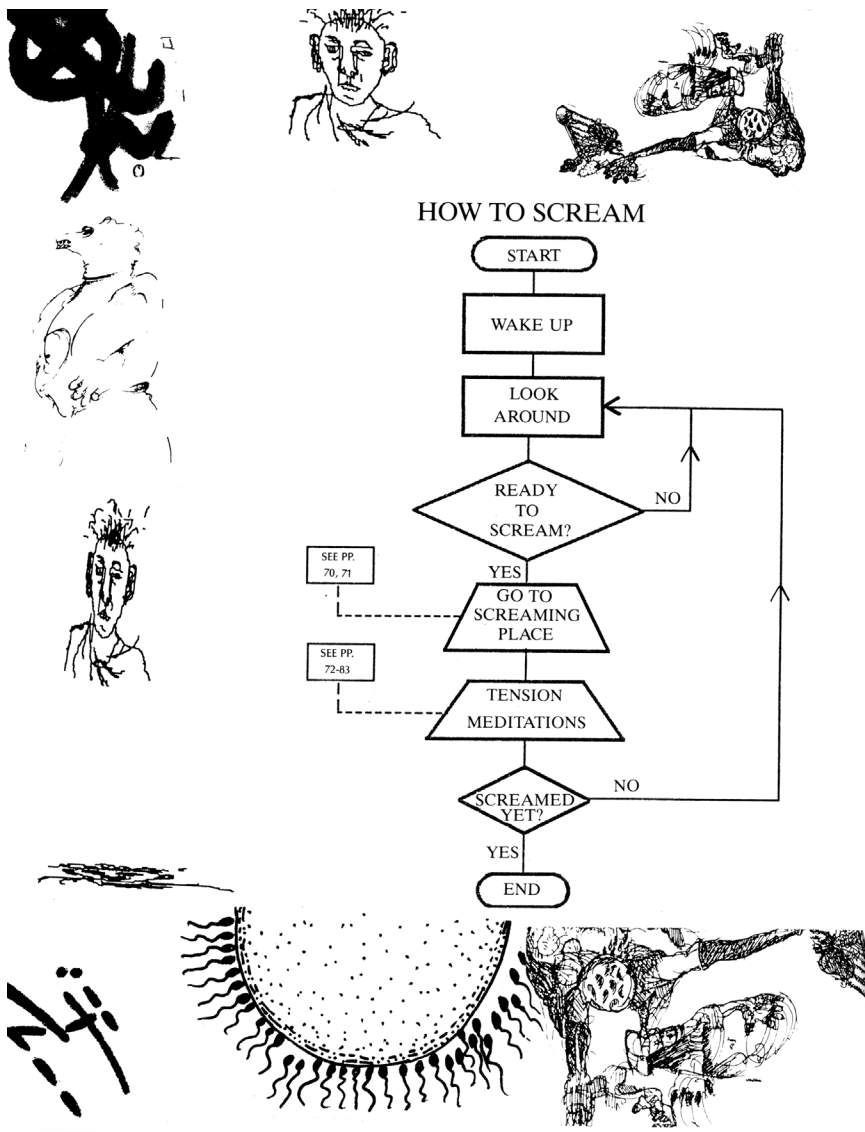


Figure 4.2: Excerpt from “SCREAM (How To)” from *The Scream: First Draft, The Third Annual Group Show* by First Draft, 1984.

Their performances did not require, as far as I know, audience participation. However, outside of performance, they did produce text-based works that incorporate process, proprioception, and movement. Their self-published commemorative book *The Scream: First Draft, the Third Annual Group Show* (1984) is an elaborately designed collagist book composed of photographs, sketches, scores, and abstract imagery and containing several text-based works, including notes, essays, and a brief biographical description of the group. At this stage in First Draft's history, *The Scream* identifies as members of First Draft Susan McMaster, Colin Morton, Andrew McClure, Claude Dupuis, Nan Cormier, David Parsons, and Carol English, all of whom contributed to the book.

Sherrill Grace suggests that "The book deconstructs the usual notion of text to create a new type of multimedia textuality."⁶² Their piece entitled "SCREAM (How To)," which they refer to as "a new collaborativeperformance art work,"⁶³ is most exemplary of an intermedial kinetic work. It presents a "step-by-step guide to refining your own capacity to scream."⁶⁴ Accordingly, the piece intersects with Fluxus-affiliated intermedial artworks like Ono's *Grapefruit*. Written by all contributors to the book, "SCREAM (How To)" touches numerous haptic areas: it demands readers consider the locations and positions of their bodies (in preparation for the scream). It instructs them to endure a series of physical activities to affect their psychological and emotional states, building toward emotional release through screaming. They begin by suggesting possible locations for screaming (a phone booth, a street, the National Gallery, a wedding, etc.), which is followed by a series of what they refer to as "tense meditations." These meditations are intended to help one reach "optimal tension" so that one's scream can "express the absolute horror of your existence."⁶⁵ These methods of meditation include "not breathing," which may cause one to feel panic or exasperation; "the hang up," which requires one to hang by one's hands from a bar, which may cause exhaustion; and "the loggerhead," which requires one to fist fight, thus, likely, building up stress and anger. Once readers have grown sufficiently tense, the poets provide a flow chart that directs readers through each remaining step. While the flow chart begins with "WAKE UP," it is significant that the step immediately preceding the instruction to scream is actually "LOOK AROUND."⁶⁶ It is from looking around that readers are prompted to begin screaming, and, as indicated in the flow chart, if they are not ready to scream, they should continue to look around some more. First Draft, then, ascribes the need to express

“the absolute” horror of existence not to existence itself, but to the conditions of existence—that is, the societal conditions in which they live. They clarify this point on the back of the book: “in the midst of your scream you no longer feel like a powerless cog; for an instant you may even experience the illusion that you can control your own destiny.”⁶⁷ “SCREAM (How To)” provides momentary catharsis from the conditions of the present—specifically, the lack of agency one feels in the face of a quickly evolving social and political landscape that reduces people to mere “cogs” in a system. It seems that even in 1984, when *The Scream* was published, the sense of alienation many began to feel in the 1960s continued to be deeply ingrained within Western society.

Games and Puzzles

Instruction-based poems encourage readers to explore the possibilities of literature off the page, employing a playfulness that assists them in focusing on the material elements of the work in their hands. This playfulness is pushed even further by some borderblur poets who developed a series of literary-based games. John Riddell produced several literary games in the 1980s using the flexibility of Underwhich’s production mandate as an opportunity to publish interactive game-based works, including *Game of Cards* (1985), *WAR* (1981), and *d’Art Board* (1987). These works, like many discussed in this book, blur medial and generic borders. Since “Riddell insists that his readers reject passive reception of writing in favour of a more active role,” each of his texts requires a unique and mostly unconventional type of engagement.⁶⁸ For example, *WAR [Words at Roar], Vol. 1: s/word/s Games* requires the reader to cut up an original text and reassemble the pieces following Riddell’s instructions. Riddell encourages the reader to directly contact him to discuss the work: “let me know how you feel about the puzzle!”⁶⁹ he writes.

Riddell first conceived of *WAR* as a four-volume work, but not all volumes saw publication. Volume 1 emphasizes kinetics as a fundamental aspect of the work. The book was xerographically produced and created following a collagist aesthetic. The verso of each page contains fragments of a prose text that the reader is encouraged to cut out; on the recto are various bits of text, including quotes, comments, and questions, to which the reader may respond. Riddell is careful with his instructions. He encourages readers to follow his prompts, but he confirms that it is also their decision to engage the text however they want: “you need not cut out designed areas . . . to do so, however, forfeits not only puzzle construct, but your active involvement



Figure 4.3: Front cover of *WAR*, vol. 1, by John Riddell, 1981.

in the /con//destruction of this & (as a further reading will reveal) possibly your own text!”⁷⁰ “Your choice,” he writes. Instead of cutting and assembling the puzzle, one can still be actively involved with the text, though that choice does diminish the degree of bodily engagement that Riddell promises in volume 1. One could answer Riddell’s questions about layout and design or follow his alternative set of instructions to “write poems . . . using extracts &/or ‘WAR’ proper on each page (or collectively) as your total supply text,” thus suggesting that this is not only a text that you cut up but also a text that you write alongside.⁷¹ Regardless of one’s pathway through the text, Riddell has established *WAR* as a designated pathway of clear communication and dialogue between author and reader. He includes his address on the fifth page of the text, and in the separate pamphlet, hopes that readers will “accordingly respond.”⁷²

By these instructions, it is clear that Riddell seeks to destabilize conventional notions of authorship and invite the reader to become an author of the text as well. Though calling *WAR* a poem may seem like a stretch, it indulges in a variety of literary devices, including extensive punning on “peace” and “author.” Like a puzzle, “peace” puns on “piece,” two terms that propel the text as a textual puzzle and its thematic concern of peace. Not only does Riddell seek to undo conventional notions of authorship by actively involving the reader in the production of textual meaning, but he extends the meaning of the word “author” to include broader notions of power and authority. For Riddell, it seems that the erosion of authorship correlates to the erosion of larger structures of authority. In a pamphlet accompanying *WAR* volume 1, Riddell describes the post–Second World War arms race, highlighting the spirit of industrial competition that animated the United States during the Cold War, but also the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. Riddell’s writing highlights the promise of catastrophe that the arms race represented, recognizing it as the dominant form of “peaceful discourse,” or, in other words, the promise of peace as a result of mutually assured destruction. By establishing the text as a clear passage between author and reader, the work becomes a point of contact, a point of discussion wherein both author and reader are equally capable of hopefully undoing textual hierarchies and situating the poem as a collaborative effort.

For the sake of research, I indulged Riddell’s request to /con//deconstruct the puzzle. My primary goal was to answer Riddell’s fundamental question: How does the process make me feel? Careful not to destroy my copy, I photocopied

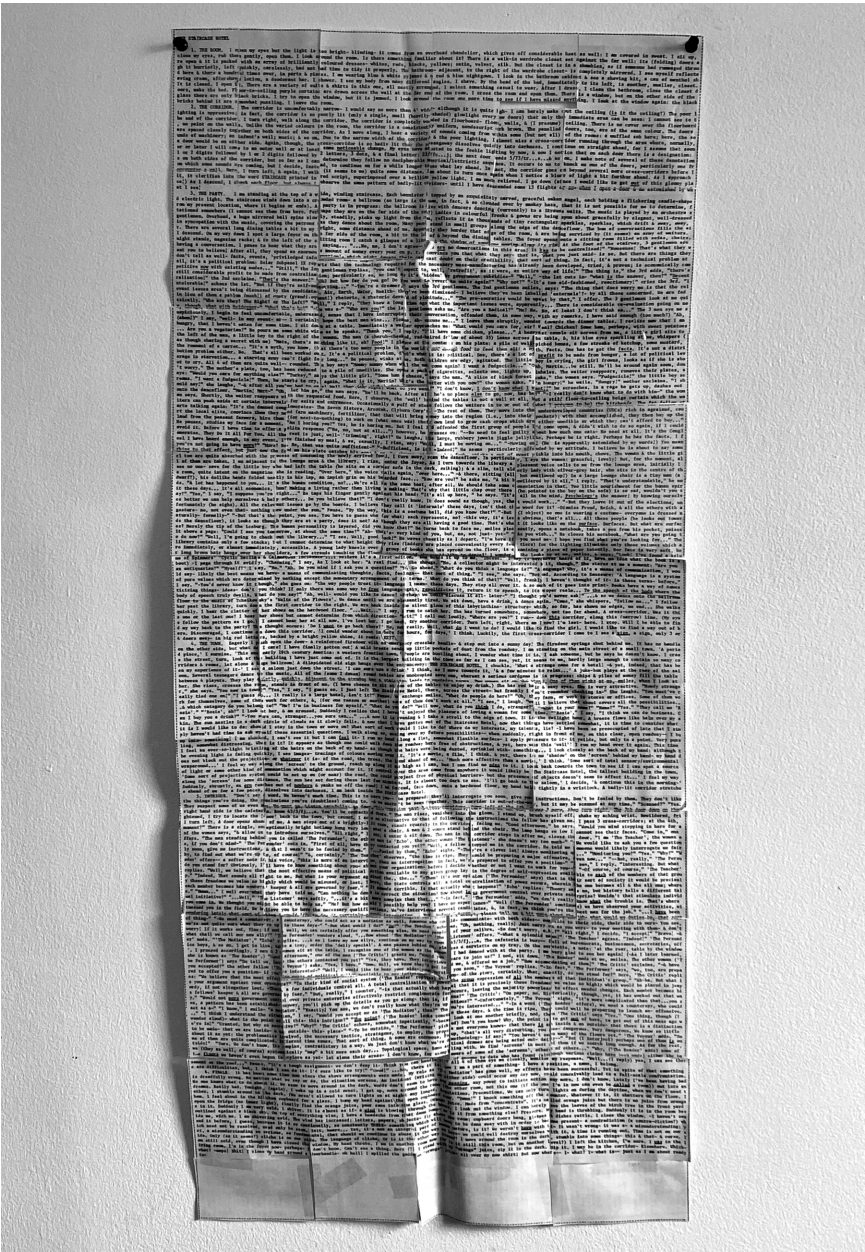


Figure 4.4: The assembled text from John Riddell's WAR, vol. 1, assembled by the author in his home.

WAR and carefully cut out each fragment from each page. This took several hours, a period during which I admittedly felt tremendous boredom. At various points, I also felt annoyed, disappointed, and determined. I could see that some of my cutting was less than precise, which meant to me that I might not be able to solve the puzzle successfully. As I cut, I had to control my body and its movements precisely. I could not shake or swerve from the outline of each piece; I had to move slowly and cut as close to the edges of the lettering and lines as I could. As I cut out more pieces, however, I also became more engaged by the text. I was developing a familiarity with the fragments; I was reading across awkwardly broken lines, pieces of words and letters, and soon began to find corresponding fragments. I taped them together as I found them, which I also found encouraging. It generated a desire in me to complete the text. In total, it took six hours to cut up the text and assemble most of it. The process was exhausting, and as I finished taping together what I thought were the final pieces, I realized I was missing a piece, which, of course, left me incredibly frustrated. I woke the next morning to find the missing piece. I am not sure if I threw it out with the scraps or if I had just never printed it. Nonetheless, it illustrated the risk one takes in trying to adhere to Riddell's instructions: carelessness and a lack of attention are an obstacle to completing the work. I reprinted the final piece and put it in place. Having completed the puzzle, I felt satisfied. More importantly, though, what I realized by enduring this process was that the interactive elements drew me into the text. As I worked through the puzzle, I developed an intimate relationship with the work and fashioned a narrative that is singular to me and my specific textual encounter.

Once assembled, the fragments form a large poster containing a prose narrative. The narrative on the poster is conventional. It is a short story in six parts, told by a first-person speaker. We enter the narrative *in medias res*, with the speaker at "The Staircase Hotel." The tone of the narration recalls the grittiness and matter-of-factness of film noir—the hotel itself is shadowy and full of mystery, a mystery that unfolds throughout the text. Moving around the hotel, the speaker, in the third section, happens upon "The Party," where several gentlemen are speaking about business, public relations, and how corporate PR obfuscates public knowledge. Specifically, these men discuss how corporate discourse (and political discourse) sidestep discussions of key issues like air, earth, water, and health, which have been "dismissed."⁷³ The speaker moves from this conversation and finds himself alone in a library

with a young woman, who begins to quiz the speaker on his thoughts about language. The speaker replies, “it’s a means of communication, I would say—likely, the best means we have—a way of communicating thoughts, facts, feelings.”⁷⁴ The woman sighs disappointedly and reflects upon the ways language is misused: “They step all over it. & so much of it goes into print—Books have a way of domesticizing things—ideas—don’t you think. If only there was some way to free language again, repoliticize it, return it to speech, to its proper realm. . . . To the speech of the body where the body of speech truly dwells.”⁷⁵ Shortly after, in the fifth and sixth sections, the narrator finds himself working as a counter-spy for two opposing groups; the woman from the library is on one side of this divide. He agrees to work for both groups, feeling a sense of belonging. In the sixth section, the story shifts again, with the speaker, alone, reflecting on his position as a spy: “An incident (arising on either side) could occur any day now, could conceivably lead to a full-scale confrontation. No one knows what to do about it. We seem to move around in the dark. Words don’t seem to have any meaning, any power to initiate action anymore.”⁷⁶ The speaker continues to reflect upon language in this final scene, mainly its inadequacies, until, after spilling orange juice on his shirt, he begins to stutter, “But now where—I—What—what is—just as I am about ready to—,” and there the story ends.⁷⁷

Driven by a tale of shadowy interactions, Riddell’s narrative on the poster that comprises volume 1 is a reflection upon the inadequacies of language—with particular attention to how the corporate and bureaucratic uses of language obfuscate essential ideas. Similarly, as in the case of the spy/counter-spy scenario, the speaker joins both sides, with no real attachment to either, for a sense of belonging. Both cases reflect upon the powerlessness of language in these depoliticized and detached scenarios. Without making a clear case for how this might be done, the narrative calls for the return of language to the body, for this is how language will be freed and politicized once more. While the story does not offer a method for reconnecting language and the body, volume 1 of *WAR*, as an interactive and kinetic work, does offer an answer. By providing a text that must be disassembled and reassembled by the reader, Riddell has invited the reader to become invested in the text in a tangible way. In some ways, this is a test that challenges a reader’s investment in the task of fully accessing the language of the work and thus the meaning behind it. In this way, Riddell offers a means of returning language to the body by encouraging the reader to invest their body, time, and energy into the text.

Another work, *d'Art Board*, published by Underwhich, consists of a single, semi-glossy sheet of paper that measures approximately two feet square. On the semi-glossy side is the main body of text, which is designed to look like a dartboard. This same text was republished (with rules) in Riddell's *How to Grow Your Own Light Bulbs* (1997) with an alternate title, "Object D'art." In this version, the dartboard is reproduced in pieces that readers cut out of the book to assemble themselves. Riddell provides instructions on how to set up and play the game. The dartboard must be hung so that the "bull's eye is 68" from the floor" and the throwing line is 9 feet from the wall.⁷⁸ The outside edge of the board is surrounded by the letters *a* through *z*; each of these letters corresponds to a number: "A = 20, B = 1, C/D = 18 . . . Z = 5."⁷⁹ Dense collages of text have replaced the typical colours of the board: we see an evenly spaced series of prosaic textual fragments that are barely legible, followed by collages of bolder, denser, non-semantically arranged letters. The game oscillates between sense and nonsense while blurring the borders between fiction, visual poem, and game.

Riddell's *d'Art Board* employs the same movements as a typical game of darts. Darts is a game of proprioception—one must position one's body per the rules (behind the 9-foot line) and should throw a dart, aiming 68 inches above the floor, at the bull's eye. It demands an awareness of the body as the dart is set in motion—a flick of the wrist with an appropriate amount of force to ensure the dart accurately follows the desired trajectory. Strangely, Riddell's version of darts does not use text to replace the role of numbers in calculating the game's score, leaving me with no clear understanding of the role the text actually plays in the scoring of the game. The title of the second edition of the game ("Object D'Art") suggests that the work is meant to be purely ornamental. An *objet d'art* (or art object) is an ornately created object that has no other function aside from producing pleasure in the beholder or user. Riddell's "Object D'Art," then, offers participants an opportunity of orienting the body directly toward a physical, proprioceptive relationship with language, to reconceive of this relationship purely as a joyous encounter.

Riddell is not the only borderblur poet to develop a literary-based game to create new and unique encounters with language. Like Riddell and his *d'Art Board*, the Four Horsemen jointly developed a game that blurs the line between narrative, poem, and play: it is entitled "Andoas." The instructions for the game—or more accurately, *most* of the instructions needed to play—were published in a 1979 issue of the Toronto arts newspaper *Only*

Paper Today. The players are required to create their own board, pieces, and statistics sheets. The game is designed to resemble other popular games of the 1970s, especially role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* and board-based games like *Monopoly*. Like *Dungeons & Dragons*, “Andoas” is narrative-driven, complete with multiple universes that players can move in and out of as they play in competition or collaboration. Movement around the board follows precisely detailed rules, and the players interact with one another through what in the game are called “encounters” and “situations.” The narrative—or “scenario,” as it’s called—that drives the game is devised entirely by the players and, as an example, can include the following:

Player A has amnesia & has escaped from hospital. Because his memory is faulty he wanders from place to place not recognizing anyone. Player B has been hired to find him. Since A does not know who he is & does not remember anyone else the key element in the SCENARIO was B’s ability to win A’s confidence so that he would trust him enough to return with him to the hospital. Thus it was not enough for B to simply find A. The only possible way to show this in the game is to incorporate an element of repeated ENCOUNTERS. “Winning” in this amnesiac SCENARIO depended on B’s being the winner in 5 different ENCOUNTERS.⁸⁰

The winners of these encounters are determined by the rolling of dice against a series of odds laid out in a statistics chart; winners of these encounters receive experience points that contribute to their chance of winning while also shaping the narrative arc of the game.

Without an official and complete game, “Andoas” can make for a challenging process; however, my attempts to play have offered me enough insight to situate the game critically. “Andoas” is based in tactility and movement—the players touch the pieces in a virtual space, moving them on and around the board. The game establishes scenarios that are not immersive in a physical sense; instead, they are virtually immersive, intersecting with McLuhan’s expanded conceptualization of tactility as “the life of things in the *mind*.”⁸¹ The scenarios are played out only through the movement of the pieces and through the players as they imagine the scenario. Part of what propels the

game—in addition to strategic thinking—is the excitement provided by the players’ encounters with one another, either in competition or co-operation.

Though framed as a game, “Andoas” challenges participants to carefully consider what it means to play, not just as players in a game, but as persons in the real world. In their introductory blurb to the game, the Four Horsemen suggest that the game encourages players to “determine what a ‘win’ or a ‘loss’ means to them.”⁸² In that same blurb, they suggest that this is a didactic game: “It is an educative experience the whole family can benefit from.”⁸³ This didacticism is essential to understanding the significance of the game, especially its treatment of the concepts of winning and losing. Notions like these—synonymous with success and failure, sinking and swimming—comprise some of the dominant forces that drive subjects living under the conditions of capitalism. A subject’s place within capitalist society is primarily determined by their ability to play by society’s rules, and they are promised pleasure if they can succeed in doing so. On the one hand, “Andoas” offers an escape from that challenge, inviting players into a universe in which they can escape and develop an alternative narrative of their choosing, which speaks to one of the powers of games and play—namely, relief. On the other, it makes a soft but radical gesture insofar as it encourages players to reconsider notions of competition, while not challenging the foundational impetus of competition, and to perhaps more actively determine what outcomes satisfy definitions of winning and losing, in both material and virtual realms.

Immersive and Environmental Works

Each of the works mentioned so far requires a certain level of performativity; players have to follow a set of instructions and/or move or engage an object in a certain way. There are, however, works that foreground performance explicitly so as to create interactive and immersive language-based experiences. In 1981, Michael Dean, a core member of the sound poetry group Owen Sound, developed a similarly immersive installation entitled *The Imagination of Aldo Breun*, which was installed at Studio Gallery Nine in Toronto as part of *The Symposium of Linguistic Onto-Genetics*. The symposium, co-organized by Dean, investigated problems of communication and language’s relationship to expression. In a special issue of *Open Letter* focusing on pataphysics, Dean articulates his concerns in the development of a theory of linguistic onto-genetics: “Language is suffering from a deep disturbance. It is not working the way it should. It isn’t serving the human function it was meant to serve; that is, it

no longer contains the poignancy and energy of Human Communication.”⁸⁴ The work of the Institute of Linguistic Onto-Genetics, then, is grounded in some of the ideas that intersect those of borderblur—mainly a shared concern for issues of expression during a period of changing communicative capacities. As suggested by Dean’s printed introduction to the *Papers Delivered at the Symposium of the Institute of Linguistic Onto-Genetics*—found in the 1985 collected proceedings for the symposium—the institute was part of an effort to repair the “schism between Man and his language,” which will “continue as long as we refuse to attend to speech directly.” Thus “Man must rebel” against this separation and try to re-fuse language and ontology.⁸⁵

The papers delivered at the symposium variously intersect with the radical premise Dean outlines in his introduction. McCaffery imagines what he refers to as “paleosexuality and fossil speech,” a concept that, in his paper, was discovered by the imaginary pseudo-scientist Samuel Gatty.⁸⁶ Janine Mather, on the other hand, theorizes the application of “psychometry to language” to examine the “emotional bondage in which speech is now trapped.”⁸⁷ The symposium itself was a space for creative engagements with materiality, corporeality, and poetic language beyond the book. The participants imagined themselves as part of an alternative universe composed of imaginary scientific investigations that rely upon (for the most part) material realities with the intent of not only highlighting the perceived schism between language and human communication, but also the relationship between body, feeling, and language. Pataphysical experiments like these effectively blurred the boundaries between life and art, fusing scientific discourse (which is perceived to be integral to material and social processes) and the poetic. Some participants also explored the possibilities of blurring these boundaries. This allowed some participants to experiment with notions of corporeality and identity, distributing imagined personas of themselves into material performance and print spaces. Brian Dedora, for example, created his alter ego, Adrian Fortesque, while Riddell composed a correspondence series with his own alter ego, Lledir Nhan Nhoj. Though seemingly playful, these personalities foreground language’s intrinsic relationship to identity and how a body is read and interpolated by others in the world.

The most striking kinetic aspect of the symposium was Michael Dean’s centrepiece, *The Imagination of Aldo Breun*, which was also the setting for panel discussions. As part of the symposium, Dean delivered a lecture on the installation, which describes the latter’s core pataphysical elements. As

participants walked through the gallery, they were walking through (according to Dean) the imaginary landscape of the fictional pseudo-scientist Aldo Breun. Breun is said to have witnessed the schism between language and humankind, indicated by the development of a “mutant letter,” the letter y.⁸⁸ The letter is significant here for the ambiguity it holds in the alphabet. Is it a vowel or a consonant? At the moment of its invention, a moment that Dean says occurred on 14 July 1832, “mute syntax” was born, which describes “the inability of language to find one expression for a fact of state-of-affairs that is dual in nature,” or, in other words, “the struggle to find the word.”⁸⁹ According to Dean, this suggests that “a rupture has grown between our genetic imagination development and our being.”⁹⁰ Language is no longer material; it no longer functions literally or forcefully in the world, but rather is up for interpretation and analysis. For Dean, “language is a shadow left by light after it has met an object.”⁹¹ Human communication with language has become less precise and convoluted. The installation portion of the symposium, the inhabitable companion to Dean’s talk, visually and spatially registers this conception of language.

The Imagination of Aldo Breun has been referred to as “probably the largest & most thoroughly contemplative piece to have been built in Toronto.”⁹² Breun, a mysterious character, “developed an interest in ‘those conditions which the mind could grasp, but which language could not express.’”⁹³ That problem sets the stage for *The Imagination of Aldo Breun*, a large-scale and immersive poetic environment. Curry described the installation as follows:

One walked *into* the poem, huge distorted letter-shapes reaching out across the floor & up the walls from a central point in the room. It was also perhaps the most nonsyntactical piece made public: not only were there no words (save those in the title of the piece), the letters themselves defied fixation as specific letters. What appears to be an H at first glance could just as easily be a mutant A. Context is derived entirely from the title, content entirely from the viewers’ own interpretations.⁹⁴

In this same article, Curry describes *The Imagination of Aldo Breun* as a “logical extension of earlier concepts of concrete & visual poetry,” and acknowledges that here “space [is] functioning as field & image.”⁹⁵ These latter



Figure 4.5: Installation photograph of *The Imagination of Aldo Breun* by Michael Dean, November 1981.



Figure 4.6: Installation photograph of *The Imagination of Aldo Breun* by Michael Dean, November 1981.

terms gesture toward the same elements that comprise kinetic poetics, with their emphasis on space and immersion and the body situated within a field.

Dean's installation gestures toward the relationship between light and shadow, opacity and transparency, object and perspective. Vision is essential to the work—the beholder is supposed to see the shadows—but so is the body, as it orients the degree and angles from which the installed mutant letters may be viewed. As curry notes, "What appears to be an H at first glance could just as easily be a mutant A," which suggests that what each piece might be perceived to be is also determined by how the body is positioned: distance, angle, movement, height, and even the number of people in the room would affect viewers' interpretations.⁹⁶ *The Imagination of Aldo Breun* foregrounds how language, even when reduced to its most basic elements, relies on the body's movement and position. In its own way, *The Imagination of Aldo Breun* exemplifies the statement from Nichol that opens this chapter—"syntax equals the body structure"⁹⁷—except Dean's installation offers a twist on that claim, implying as it does that body equals the letter structure. *The Imagination of Aldo Breun* suggests that the processual relationship that Nichol highlights operates in both ways. Nichol argues that "If I can keep moving the structure of the poem around, hopefully I can encompass different realities and different ways of looking at things."⁹⁸ Likewise, in the case of Dean's installation, if one keeps moving the body around the space by changing locations, positions, directions, etc., then one can also encompass different realities and different ways of looking at things. The poem, then, is only enacted by a viewer's active movement within the space. Even the letter shapes themselves are left by shadow; they are open to interpretation from the reader and are therefore entirely dependent upon the reader's body.

Like Dean, Gerry Shikatani composed works that are also interactive and immersive, offering the audience a chance to become part of the literary work. An installation like his *Sans Titre* (24 October 1981), also held at Toronto's Studio Gallery Nine but as part of the Kontakte Writers in Performance series, places the audience directly within the work: "Installation of desk, typewriter and visual text in elevator used by audience to reach performance space. Used to activate aural and visual space of language/action of reading."⁹⁹ This is likely one of Shikatani's first conceptually influenced poetic installations grounded in his "interest in and relationship to *process* and thus, the moment ephemeral."¹⁰⁰ Recalling the performance in an email, Shikatani writes,

I do not think there were any instruction for the audience—it was a prop of silence, of potential—and it could be that some did type on it. The reading/performance was no different from a usual one I think—as the main issue was to condition, contextualize the reading as something that pushed the event outside the clear and usual spatial/temporal borders of a literary reading.¹⁰¹

Using the small space of an elevator, *Sans Titre* augments audience members' sense of the environment and the installation. Elevators are typically small spaces wherein riders try to maintain a buffer between themselves and other riders. In these situations, one becomes more aware of one's body in relation to others. *Sans Titre* seizes upon the intimacy of the space and the ways by which it informs the body's structure—reminding us, again, of Nichol's argument for the way environments shape the body.

This piece reminds me, too, of the importance of absence in Shikatani's work, especially absent bodies. In the same year that Shikatani installed *Sans Titre*, he published with David Aylward an anthology of Japanese-Canadian poetry entitled *Paper Doors*, a collection of poems in translation that was first privately published and circulated among a small readership in Canada. In his introduction, Shikatani directly connects the dearth of published Japanese-Canadian poetry with what he calls "The Evacuation."¹⁰² He is, of course, referring to the period during the Second World War when many Japanese Canadians were forcibly sent to prison camps or otherwise detained in remote settlements in British Columbia. Even after the war ended, the injustice continued, Shikatani notes in *Paper Doors*. Some young Japanese Canadians, who now held the responsibility for rebuilding their families' lives, felt that pursuing careers in the arts was not viable. Instead, they felt pressure to assimilate by adopting "Canadian middle class ideals, and following careers in business or the trades," says Shikatani.¹⁰³

Returning to *Sans Titre*, the audience would arrive to the venue expecting a night of audible readings, but they first faced Shikatani's Olympia typewriter without a human body. Considering its temporal proximity to the publication of *Paper Doors*, I cannot help but connect the installation to the conditions of the Evacuation and its long-term repercussions that discouraged Japanese Canadians from pursuing the arts. I therefore frame the piece as a lament. The unused typewriter is confined to the liminality of the elevator, a holding space that is always between points of origin and arrival. And

this is reflective of the ways that aspiring poets—perhaps the children of the detained families—maybe felt forced to abandon the arts so that they could serve their families and reconstruct their lives. The title, French for “untitled,” gestures toward this sense of absence.

Four years after this piece, Shikatani’s Olympia typewriter appeared again as a prop of silence in a seemingly related performance entitled “Certain un Certain.” This is a hybrid lecture-performance that he did at the Centre for Canadian Culture in Paris, France, on 23 January 1985. Shikatani confirmed that this piece directly references his introduction to *Paper Doors* as well as *Koku*, a one-hour literary documentary that he made for CBC’s *Anthology* program, hosted by Robert Weaver, to commemorate the 1977 centenary of the first Japanese immigrant to Canada. From these two direct references, I speculate that the history of the Evacuation and Shikatani’s concern for absence and transience survive in this performance. He described “Certain un Certain” to me as a way “to introduce silence” as a “potential of reflection by a public encountering disjunction.”¹⁰⁴ For “Certain un Certain,” he placed his typewriter in the middle of the room, within the audience, to the left of where he would perform. The typewriter faces a member of the audience. As it did in the elevator in 1981, the typewriter foregrounds the process of writing and, in this case, the typed lecture as a kind of score for performance. Shikatani also placed a kettle in the room, which gradually heated water for tea, which he explained is connected to a tea ceremony (*cha-no-yu*). As I understand it, there is a text for this performance that has never been published; unfortunately, it was either lost or exists only in fragments in Shikatani’s private archive. In recounting this event to me, he emphasized that silence more than vocal sound is the core component of this performance. He describes this work as a “minimalist signature” guided by the aesthetics of silence, and by extension, absence. I wonder if the “text” is merely a set of instructions for Shikatani to follow in performance rather than a text for recitation. If there was any vocalization in this performance at all, it seems likely that it was not the main feature. The audience was meant to contemplate the environment of the room, to contemplate the typewriter, to listen to the boiling water. Shikatani emphasized the presence of his body in the room, and by invoking traditional tea ceremonies, he asked his audience to consider his connection to culture and tradition.

Shikatani returned to similar themes for another performance in Paris that same year, held at the ninth installment of the Polyphonix Festival for

International Poetry. He recalled for me that he may have read from his 1984 book of poetry *A Sparrow's Food* during the performance, or from an earlier, unpublished text entitled "Waves," commissioned by Boston-based sculptor and performance artist Bart Uchida. The actual text used during this performance could dramatically alter its meaning. *A Sparrow's Food* consists of a mix of lyrical poems alongside drawings and other visuals that range widely in theme. The latter text, "Waves," Shikatani explained to me, employs English and Japanese words with modulations that fuse the two languages. The main thrust of this performance was its "false ending," a tactic he says he employed in numerous other performances. For this 1985 "false ending," however, Shikatani abruptly stopped his reading and walked off stage as the room faded to black; it was several minutes before he and the lights returned. If we assume that Shikatani read "Waves," then this piece's combination of English and Japanese and Shikatani's sudden departure from the stage could be said to resonate with his other performances. The false ending hypothetically unsettles the audience's expectations of the reading as an event with a clear beginning and end. The result is an even more dramatic creation of absence, an absence of voice and body. Each of these performance pieces were designed to create a unique and intimate experience between the poet, audience, and the performance space, and they did so by drawing attention to bodily absences in spaces where an audience might expect a greater presence on the part of the performing body. In subverting these expectations, Shikatani's performances turned the experience back on the audience members, prompting them to contemplate their relationship to the room and its objects, to Shikatani, and ultimately to each other.

However, Shikatani's immersive performances also prompt us to reconsider the notion of Canadian identity, since each piece, in its own oblique way, points to cultural relations. It is notable that several of the performances detailed above occurred not in Canada, but in France, where Shikatani resided for some time, indicative not only of his own international comportment, but of the ways that Canadian borderblur—in this case through the work of Shikatani—is connected to global networks. His work also has significant implications for cultural relations at home in Canada. Poet and critic Rachel Zolf has described Shikatani as a "Japanese-Canadian man working primarily in English but with an oral/aural knowledge of Japanese from his childhood." She explains that "Shikatani's knowledge base includes the silencing of his Japanese language and identity that the imperialism of the English Language

and its inherent racism enacts.”¹⁰⁵ Building on Zolf’s description, I extend this characterization of Shikatani’s practice to his poetic performances and installations. His pursuit of absence—of voice and body—may be understood as a reference to the Canadian government’s silencing and displacement of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. My readings of his performances here, which take place partially through the lens of the traumas and injustices of the Evacuation, would likely displease Shikatani. In the introduction to *Paper Doors*, he reflects upon the historical and social framework he advances to introduce his audience to Japanese-Canadian poetry. “Doubtless, the notion of an absolute and exclusive genre of poetry which addresses ‘Japaneseness’ and historical data such as ‘The Evacuation’ may seem attractive to some,”¹⁰⁶ he writes. But he also cautions that “this could narrow Japanese-Canadian sensibility within the ethnoculture and set up a schema for the interpretation of Japanese Canadians in which sociological and historical conditioning are advanced archetypal motives in a linear rationale of the most obvious kind. Ultimately, any approach insisting on the linearity of narrative history to define art is, to me, not totally satisfying.”¹⁰⁷ Indeed. Going forward, I hope my analysis here marks a starting point for further investigations into Shikatani’s poetry that not only emphasize historical and social events, but that also, as Shikatani suggests in *Paper Doors*, “expand our visions of the nature of the potential of Canadian literature, and that, in effect, will teach us much more about language itself.”¹⁰⁸

These words from Shikatani’s *Paper Doors* points me back to the collective work that all poets discussed in this chapter sought to advance—namely, the aesthetically and politically diverse exploration of language as it relates to the body. Poets like Nichol, Shikatani, Riddell, First Draft, and the others mentioned above created poems that directly engage the interface of poem, material, and audience by requiring an encounter on the kinetic level. In doing so, they transformed the poem into a space wherein the audience (and at times the poets themselves) could reconsider and renegotiate the conditions of the electric age, and its impact on the tactile and proprioceptive dimensions of human life. In many of the poems published under the auspices of borderblur, the literary work expands beyond the linguistic content of the poem (with its semantic meaning) to include its materiality as a necessary aspect of the text’s meaning. This is not a modernist consideration of form as a mere extension of content. Rather, it is through the careful consideration of these materials that the poet, as Nichol would say, reaches out to touch their

audience. The poem and its materiality, then, become a mode of experience that is felt primarily through somatic registers that productively reintroduce the audience to the material conditions of their world.

The electric age was characterized by rampant technological development, which in turn significantly impacted the psychological and physiological conditions of human life during the mid- to late twentieth century. While new communication technologies mediated interaction, a kinetic poetic provided a means by which some might overcome the alienation felt as the world became less human and more technological—especially as human communication and expression came increasingly to rely upon media and its infrastructure. In effect, human subjectivity—and expressions of that subjectivity—became reliant upon these structures threatening to standardize human life, reducing any person to the role of consumer and producer within a capitalist marketplace. In light of this threat, poetry that turns toward the kinetic—with its emphasis on touch, tactility, and proprioception—was a necessary response, offering a means by which the audience and participant could regain an awareness of their bodies within contrived systems (artistic, economic, social, etc.) and consciously attend to how to their bodies enter, exceed, and engage those structures.