

Joanne Kyger

There You Are: Interviews, Journals, and Ephemera

edited by Cedar Sigo

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REVIEWED BY EMMA BROWN SANDERS

First in Wave's new interview series is a volume on Joanne Kyger. Cedar Sigo edited this collection of Kyger's interviews, poems and ephemera, which was published six months after Kyger's passing in March 2017. While the timing is bittersweet, Sigo has created a work that is far more than a collection of exchanges with Kyger throughout the years. Sigo is an astute and sensitive curator of Kyger's life and work, the differences between which for her were indistinguishable. Undoubtedly, Sigo's experience with collaboration (for example, his collaborative poems with Micah Ballard he discussed on the City Lights blog) have aided him here:

Collaboration is also editing. It's easy to just fire away contributing lines to a poem, but cutting the final shape together requires a more delicate hand. You can't exactly tip toe around each other as to which lines should be left out, reordered, reversed; the sooner you are willing to begin, the easier the editing process becomes. You learn a lot about your voice in collaborating, certain things you may stress too often as content in your poetry, or you will notice certain tones that your collaborators will erase from the works you make together.

While *There You Are* is not straightforward collaboration, in that Kyger allowed access to the materials but did not herself make curatorial decisions about the book, surely Sigo must have felt the difficulty of selecting from her individually exquisite but prolifically robust body of work. Of particular note is Sigo's careful replication of original correspondence and first-run poem publications. Sigo has made it so we can hold in our hands facsimiles

of what might never have come to us on paper: the *Bolinas Hearsay News* (for which Kyger was the “Wednesday Editor” for years), her chapbooks *Desecheo* and *Trip Out & Fall Back* (both published by Arif Press in 1971 and 1974, respectively), and a broadside of her poem from the Kent State Arts Festival.

What does it mean to separate these facsimiles from their original purpose and placement, to decontextualize them? *The Bolinas Hearsay News* under Kyger’s editorship served a practical purpose: —advertising town happenings, listing birthdays, —facilitating the buying and selling of everyday objects. In October 2000, there is a sale on plants: 50% off all fruit trees (except citrus). The *News* itself is rife with supplementary material: poems by Robert Creeley and drawings by Philip Whalen and Arthur Okamura.

If the inclusion of some front pages of the *News* renders it as art object in the context of *There You Are*, does the inclusion of Kyger’s chapbook and broadside facsimiles similarly raise questions of their functionality, their usefulness? These poems are contextualized by their original design and art. While the words and lines are the same as in Kyger’s collected works, their form as originally published is singular. Kyger herself was interested in the interplay between the poem on the page and other mediums. For example, her 1968 film “Descartes” Descartes film for San Francisco’s NCET public TV station KQED mixed poetry and audiovisual experimentation. At the time, her lending a female voice to Descartes was considered revolutionary. Indeed, Kyger continues to be described as a rare female poet among the predominantly male Beats (though she never limited herself to being described as being a poet of any one school). Creeley credits Kyger for helping to shake off an all-male poetic establishment and way of thinking:

Early poems of Joanne Kyger’s made very clear that her place was not to be the one simply familiar, for that time at least, and her envelope had no accommodating patience for the vagaries of

Odysseus's meandering. In that way she is one of this generation's clarities, that we cannot longer indulge an habituated paternity that wants the authority of force and feels that women are somehow an addenda to the real business of life.

The inclusion of facsimiles, the capture of poems or letters as they were in the moment, also embodies the ever-humming present in each of Kyger's poems. This continuous present of Kyger's lines she called "the kind of space that vibrates its meaning ... It just stays there for a long time. You can go back into that one line and it will keep giving off overtones." And: "I really like phrases now that have some internal turning, that seem to turn around all the time."

I am concerned with the echo
it answers perfectly
one does not find
canyons like this

Even the inclusion of *ephemera* in the book's title is significant, from Greek neuter of ephēmeros: lasting only a day. In Kyger's collected works, *About Now* (National Poetry Foundation), Kyger returns in each poem to the day. The startling freshness of Kyger's poems is particularly striking in those written upon her return to her lifelong home of Bolinas from various travels. When an interviewer asks Kyger about her lifestyle, she pauses to laugh at the word, then clarifies herself the muddled concept: "About getting up in the morning? Get up in the morning and you look at the day." The thought continuing in a separate interview: "And the feeling in response to those elements."

Sigo's curatorial choices create a portrait of Kyger as an individual. In part, obviously, like the inclusion of her photographs and photographs of contemporaries she loved and respected. But Sigo also creates a sense of intimacy through the inclusion of Kyger's writing on her contemporaries,

and her contemporaries' writing on her, what Kyger describes as "a group of people writing in and out of the same situation..." The book begins on a deeply personal note—Robert Creeley's introduction of Kyger (a facsimile of his typewritten page, annotated with his handwritten cross-outs and edits) precedes even Sigo's introduction. This is a work of *access* rendered in the most intimate form possible.

When Kyger writes a reliquary for Joe Brainard following his death, it's not a eulogy, nor a traditional tribute. Kyger dwells in a space they shared and on the page, creates space for Joe to exist there. She is present with Joe on the page even following his passing. Kyger's poems denote her dwelling in a radical still that allows a connection to materialize absent of physical or verbal contact. There are similar pieces on Robert Creeley and Gregory Corso. They are presented simply as "Robert Creeley, by Joanne Kyger." They are meditations on the person, on the poet, as they exist for Kyger. There is a purity to this reflection without purpose that recalls part of Kyger's *the Long Poem*:

For how long we sit
in quiet

absurd this way no
speech
creates a
tie between us

Her integration of the poets she considered friends and respected contemporaries happens throughout her life's work. Her ideal of the group poetic voice is evident—their influence on each other she considers not only inevitable, but generative and positive, a weaving of influence on each other's work. In this way, all becomes collective. As Kyger says in one interview, the self does not exist.

Included in the book is a joint letter composed by Kyger and Larry Fagin from Paris. Joanne's portion describes a proposed invention:

THE AUDOMETER. It is composed of a rubber tube with an immobile alidad running round its edges and a sort of photographic device in the middle. The audometer was made for speaking to a person present without being heard by others. It is also used to send pills to someone sick in bed without bothering him.

How does this differ from Frank O'Hara's personism, in which the poem takes the place of the telephone? Here Kyger conceives of direct correspondence as an aid, even a tool for delivering what could alter one's state or deliver wellness. The individual at either end of the audometer benefits, whether delivering or receiving. Personism happens within the poem. Kyger's audiometer happens outside the poem but becomes indistinguishable, irremovable from the poem. Kyger never stopped insisting that how a poet lived was inseparable from the poet himself. Physical distance is no barrier, audometer or not.

Then again, writers, poets whose lives have been close to you are who often your dialogue is with. They may not necessarily be in your vicinity anymore, but they are where your thoughts go—your family as it were. From this comes an intimacy of tone which includes the reader. They are included in these anecdotal addresses.

Kyger spoke favorably—"If I congratulate everything human and everything alive then I congratulate my own living." Surely among what she considered worthy of congratulations were the correspondences and exchanges that shaped not only her work, but those to whom she was close. These connections transcend distance, time and consciousness.

This tongue denies the touch / I
tell you so / but this one way to
keep you here is

all I have discovered

Cedar Sigo, *Tape the Holy Cross: Collaborating with Micah Ballard*, City Lights Blog, August 12, 2012. <http://www.blogcitylights.com/2012/08/20/tape-the-holy-cross-collaborating-with-micah-ballard-by-cedar-sigo/>

Joanne Kyger, *About Now* (University of Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 2007).

Joanne Kyger, *Descartes*, 1968. <https://vimeo.com/68494299>

Joanne Kyger, *There You Are: Interviews, Journals, and Ephemera*, ed. Cedar Sigo (Seattle: Wave Books, 2017).