GRANT PALM

The Selected Interviews of Anselm Berrigan

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Introduction

"I always thought the interview was an interesting form. By listening to how different poets respond to questions and talk about the things you can find out what goes into their work, how they view the world, and the maze between their lives and their poetry. They are often asked they exist as a poet and then the interview is a good space for somebody to talk about that and if you have a bunch of interviews by a bunch of poets you can figure out how to live, how to live as a person, how to live as a poet."-Anselm Berrigan

Anselm Berrigan is a very engaged member of the poet/ art community. He is first of all a poet that has written eight books that are all creative in their own way. Ranging from *Pregrets* an on-going body of work to *Come In alone* a book that is entirely printed in rectangular form where all the words are on the edges of the page leaving a large blank space in the middle of the page. They often focus on political observations and prejudices. He helped on books like *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan* and *Loading.* And impressively he was the Poetry Editor at the Brooklyn Rail, a member of the sub-press publishing collective, the director of the Poetry Project, writing co-chair for the

interdisciplinary MFA program, and occasionally taught part-time at the Brooklyn College and Pratt Institute. His main job is as a self-employed Freelance Editor and does poetry readings across New York. But he is not just a poet he is also a person. He has a quite the sense of humor. He is an active father. An active member of his community, engaging in political discourse and comedic observation. And he is a big sports fan that closely follows both the Yankees and Knicks and participates in fantasy drafts. These are the facts that I learned about Anselm, and while they are great to know, to better understand someone you need to talk with them, listen to them, understand what kind of person they are and what makes them who they are. Interviews strive to achieve this understanding.

In the weeks leading up to my first interview with Anselm I was trying to figure out my major. To better understand my options I asked around and I was able to get a long list of Aerospace and Mechanical Engineers that I could call to get a better understanding of the two fields. And so I was essentially conducting interviews on a weekly bases. And while I was no expert, by the time I interviewed Anselm I had some preconceived notions on what I thought it would be like. But talking to Anselm didn't follow my notions at all, in fact the interview was refreshingly different. Before hand I wrote out twenty different questions because I was used to people who gave simple answers. Anselm on the other hand had these in-depth and thought out answers that left me with more content than I knew what to do with. We talked about everything from poetic literacy to the affect of twitter on modern writing. Sadly, after the interview was over I realized my files were corrupted and the interview was lost. But despite it being his day off Anselm agreed to help me out and we were able to record

another amazing interview the next day. Now that I've had this interaction when I go back and read *Come In Alone* or *To Hell With Sleep*, they take on a whole new meaning. While not every reader will be able to meet Anselm on the same level, I hope they can achieve some further understanding through my experience and through the interviews of others.

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GRANT PALM: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANSELM BERRIGAN

Grant Palm: When did you first decide you wanted to be a writer and did you want to be anything else?

Anselm Berrigan: I went off to college and didn't really know what I was going to do and my first year I decided to major in English and I also joined the school newspaper, this was at Sidney Buffalo, which is a large school, and the newspaper came out 3 times a week with a circulation of 13k and every issue is pretty substantial in the college newspaper context and I got pretty involved with it first as a writer doing campus news, covering different kinds of stories, I covered a murder that took place beginning of my second year that was very intense there was a lot that revolved around that. There were a lot of protests going on at school separately due to certain things happening with the budget. I started writing music reviews after a while because there was an entertainment section. Writing about music, reviewing records was really interesting, and that got me interested in other kinds of writing and I started keeping a

notebook, I was actually writing stories for a while, short stories, they were mostly about things that could happen in language, I was more interested in the words than in the plot which is probably a pretty good sign that poetry might happen, not that I knew that at that point. But by the end of my second year I was still 18, I broke a line in my notebook, instead of continuing across the page and writing a sentence and when that happened, something just kind of kicked in and I realized that was what I wanted to be doing and that I had been going through process, on the one hand I came to poetry through exploring other kinds of writing, I thought for a little while that I might be a journalist and even after I started writing poems getting more involved with that I still thought maybe I would become a journalist. I didn't take writing classes in college. The newspaper was very consuming I just gave a lot of time in that. As a teenager, I just didn't know what I wanted, I really didn't know, I sat around doing baseball statistics in my spare time. And for about five seconds thought I would be a marine biologist but that was just because I had a fixation with sharks. My parents, my mom never put any pressure on me or my brother to do anything in particular, it was more of a case of just going off to school and figuring it out and coming to it, to a degree, on my own terms. Which is probably the best way to do that.

GP: So you don't think growing up surrounded by poets caused you to become a poet?

AB: Yea, well you know, I didn't really know when I was a teenager if I, I didn't know what I could do, I just really didn't know, and we didn't have very much money, we lived in this small apartment, my father died when I was ten, I had a half-

sister, she died when I was fifteen and at that point I was just trying to make sure, figure out how to not go completely into a shell, I was half way into one, and I was very shy, and just being a person came difficult, so no it didn't occur to me to be a poet or do anything, I will say that once I started writing and once I realized I was serious about it and started to be committed to it, I realized that I kind of had the access to more information than I normally would, I wouldn't have to go hunting for Topics Words that were out of the norm and or anything like that, I didn't read a lot of poetry as a kid, I went to some readings, I read some of my father's work when I was a later teenager because I was trying to get to know him a little better, and then maybe when I was in my mid-twenties, when I had been writing for a few years it kind of dawned on my after I finished grad school I saw it, when I started writing I hadn't read a lot of poems but I had read some of my father's poems and I had read some of my mother's poems and I had gone to readings, I probably unconscientiously or semi conscientiously understood that there things you could do as a poet that other people it may take some people longer to figure out, like I thought you could be funny as a poet, I didn't think you had to be serious all the time or you could be serious by being funny and actually let humor in and that would actually okay and was entertaining and that was also reflecting an aspect of your person and who are were and was part of the relationship of language and I wasn't afraid of moving language across the page and coming off the margin, I knew really right away that that was something you could do because I had seen poems that had done that. But it didn't occur to me that I was eighteen that there was a connection there but about 7 to 8 years later I figured out that that was something that was available to me by reading my parents poems, specifically my father's.

The other things I just want to say if that I grew up on a very loving environment but I grew up in a rough neighborhood and it was intense a lot and it was very charged walking down the street, it wasn't that I was presented a lifestyle that was oh I want to do that, when I left NYC to go to Buffalo for college, I was really ready to leave New York. I did not want to be there anything. There was nothing I wanted to, you know to end, a year in Buffalo made me realize NY was so bad, but that is a different story

GP: Do you think these experiences made you better at being a poet?

AB: That's a good question. I think that, I know that the experiences did, I do think one thing that my mother and my step father, the poet Douglas Oliver, instilled in me and my brother was this sense that language was something you could follow, that you could be interested in words, listening to the way people talk and the way people spoke and the different kinds of things, different kinds of things people might say and that all of those things were interesting, and I think that will always stay with me just to pay attention to the way people speak. Although the neighborhood I grew up in was rough at times it was also filled with all these characters, these interesting people and there was a real active street life, people who sat on their stoop or outside their businesses and they would talk to you and they would think you talk to them.

GP: Do you think the same kind of experiences to the ones you had is what's lead to so many artists and poets coming from New York?

AB: Well, I think what happens is a lot of people move to New York, there are people here that grew up here, but there are a lot of people moving to NY. It is partially because there is an economy. There is an understanding that you might be a poet, it is not going to surprise everyone that you talk to that you are a poet. You can find different ways to work and live here to support yourself, and there are a lot of different kinds of artists here who have a day job so they can work at night or have a weekend job or a weekly job, so they can work on the weekends. That kind of cuts across a lot of different arts and different fields so there is a relatability, you can be here and not feel like you are completely alone.

GP: We kind of talked about this a little on Thursday, how has technology influenced your writing from when you first started writing to how it is today, or has it at all?

AB: Well, I think in some ways there is a change. Maybe I am old enough now to have experience. Language in the general sense is always the cumulating always being added to and then there are words that become part of the lexicon, the general cultural lexicon, there are words that are added to the dictionary all the time, and there is also slang that sometimes get added to the dictionary and one thing that the internet has done is create a lot of short hand and sets of terms, people are always looking for ways to take in tangible conditions of reality and turn them into vocabulary so it is easier to talk about those conditions, it is part of what theory is about and part of what a lot of academic writing is about. I think it is something that is specific to different fields and different times, you have to invent terms in order to understand new or different concepts and a

certain amount of that does come from technology, so there is that the language change, the way people use the language changes and I recently interviewed the poet John Yow, the writer. He was saying computers created a space that is shared on the one hand, through the internet and electronic communication. It also creates a space where lots of people are more isolated, or they speak out of their isolation into a public arena, but you are not actually in a room with somebody. On the one hand it creates situations where people feel really brave and say terrible things and we see the impact of that all the time, I mean we have a president who does that uses twitter to communicate to the larger of amount of people who are interested in him and it's this kind of unchecked-unthought language, so because of that I think the ways people relate to each other in some ways has changed so we are all kind of dealing with that.

The other thing that's changed is just that publishing is different. Because you can publish on line, you can do things on line, you can avoid paper entirely you can circulate work faster but that creates issues too.

When I was getting started in the early 90's it wasn't easy to find out about underground magazines, it wasn't easy to find out about poets in other towns, you had to rely on word of mouth and correspondence, you may talk to someone who had just been somewhere who had heard an interesting poet so then you look out for that name and now someone tells you that person's work is interesting, you can go right on the internet and look them up and then you might find them very quickly. I've had friends from other states friends in other countries, who I corresponded with years before I met them, we just sort of found each other. For example, poet Jay Malar in Toronto, we corresponded six or seven years before we met and then we met, and he said what

do we do now? We just walked and talked like normal people I guess.

GP: In your book "What is Poetry, Just Kidding, I Know You Know", you chose to collect select interviews from the Poetry Project. Why are interviews so important why not just choose a selection of their poetry?

AB: Well, the motivation behind that book came from working at the Poetry Project and knowing that there were a lot of very good very interesting interviews done with poets in the newsletter and different points since the newsletters beginning around 1972, 73 or 74 and that could be an interesting book and I always thought the interview was an interesting form and that it could be treated as a form and there were things you could find out by listening to how different poets responded to questions and talked about the things and that went into their work, the maze between their lives and their work, how they viewed the world. There's sort of a way of getting a lot of information, primary information being the poems, secondary information the history, the culture, the references, the experiences, all the references that might tie into the work, poets are often asked how do you exist as a poet and then the interview is a good space for somebody to talk about that and if you have a bunch of interviews by a bunch of poets you can figure out things about how to live, how to live as a person, how to live as a poet, and the interviews that had been in the newsletter had been in a period of time that stretched back to the early 1960's and it came forward into the early 21st century and was about a half century's worth of information moving in different directions, there are a lot of anthologies that are just poems but there aren't

very many books that are interviews so I thought this could be a very interesting book. There were a number of people of who were interviewed that weren't interviewed anywhere else so I thought this could be a way to give these people who I really admired more exposure, like David Henderson, Brenda Coltis, Ed Venturis. I mean all of the people in the book to me are interesting, some of them like Allen Ginsberg are especially well know, many of them are not terribly well known, and the range of people are interesting to speak to.

GP: Why do you read poetry and why is it important for people to read poetry?

AB: Well, I mean what's different for me and this goes back to the question you asked earlier about my upbringing and how I was formed by poetry. On the one hand my parents did not insist that I relate to poetry in any particular way or think it was so great or so terrible or anything like that but it was part of their daily lives so it was part of mine and I grew up with it as something that was a part of life and that it was a thing that people did and it was nothing funny or strange or highfalutin or low-falutin about it, I don't if anybody ever says low-falutin... and so you know on an ordinary level poetry was just there.

I started to read poetry then out of a more personal perspective at a certain point which had to with wanting to read my father's poems because I was very young when he died to see what I could find out about him. And as a kid you read his poems and think, is he ever talking about me? You know stuff like that and once in a while he was but mostly I would just learn about him.

I also read poetry to write poetry. If you are going to write poems, you have to be reading other people's work, you have to

see what they do, you know. It's very hard to being a musician who doesn't listen to other people's music right? Or it would hard to be a scientist who didn't pay attention to other studies in research that other scientists were doing. I mean you can't do that. As a poet it is just part of how you understand what is going on. I mean I find poems useful because people when they write poetry, are going to put into the poems what they feel or can't address in their normal life, and it lets you go faster to a space to where you are really trying to work something out or deal with something that happened to you or totally have an unknown space where you just chase the kinds of sounds you are interested in hearing. There is really no other space, whether it's an art space or a conversational space or a therapeutic space, where that kind of relationship to language happens. Parts of it can happen in other spaces, there are times when poetry overlaps with songs, there are ways when poetry overlaps prose sometimes, there are times when poetry overlap with research sometimes because there are investigations you can do using poetry as a kind of filter where information comes into your consciousness and you turn it back around and you hone in on the parts that you are interested in and try to put the parts together. All of those things create uses for poetry or they create spaces for people to make use of poetry. I don't think it's important for the everyday person to read poetry in the sense that I don't its medicine and it's going to improve somebody necessarily, but I do think that if somebody is exposed to poetry they may find something that interests them, and it may be useful down the road.

I taught a class once at Brooklyn college and I told my students one night, it was a graduate class, I said "you know we sit here writing poems and you want to try to write a lot of poems and

we think about the audience and wonder what it is and where it is, but the fact of the matter is for a lot of people one poem, one interesting poem, one strong poem might be enough for them in there life. They will memorize a few lines from something and they come back to those lines sometimes and think about them." and the students were kind of horrified because it seemed counter intuitive to what they were doing but actually I was trying to say anything you do as a poet might be interesting at some point to somebody and that might be all that person needs from poetry and that's an interesting way to think about it because I don't think you base your relationship with poetry on popularity and accessibility and outer demands for success that are quantifiable, it is just not how it really works, that's not how poetry works.

And you now I also read it because I love reading it, I read a lot of poems that drive me crazy but I am always glad to be entering a poem but I am not always glad about how I feel when I come out of it, but that is a different story. I've listened to a million songs and I only like x percentage of them but the ones I like stay with me forever and there is a way in which poetry is parallel to that.

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MICHEAL VALINSKY: A COLLECTION OF POETRY INTERVIEWS IS A WORK OF POETRY ITSELF

Michael Valinsky: *What was your inspiration for this book?*

Anselm Berrigan: I actually thought it could be made out of these interviews back when I was directing The Poetry Project, between 2003 and 2007. I was specifically interested in the interview as a way for poets to talk about all the things that are around a work but don't show up literally on the surface. It was mostly about a set of stories that would expand into a larger story that the Project's history could be folded into. When the interview form really works, it's a piece of writing that has its own dynamic and energy. I read a lot of the interviews originally in the context of the newsletter, so pulling them out of that context, reimagining them, and then making this manuscript was an unusual thing to do. A total reconfiguration of things that you've already read — which I guess is what an anthology is. That's why when I had to sit down and write an introduction, I wound up in this space where I had to list all the things this

book isn't — but almost is — in order to try to define what it is.

MV: *As you looked at the complete work, did you realize anything about The Poetry Project that hadn't occurred to you before?*

AB: The perspective I got, which maybe was a reinforcement of something I'd already suspected, was that any kind of history or representation of it as an ongoing entity was going to have to be conducted through conversation. This makes sense aesthetically, in that speech-based American poetry movements from the mid-20th century on, really inform where The Poetry Project comes from. It all really came out of a person talking. You have to engage both the language on the page and the language in the air to get the fullness of the work.

MV: *Several writers in the interviews bring up discovering Gertrude Stein and share differing views on definitions of Language Writing. Did you notice this too?*

AB: Most of the people involved with the Project have worked very closely with sonic and semantic particulars. So Stein is going to become a force to reckon with. Frank O'Hara is going to become extra-interesting. The Project also comes out of the different kinds of experiments going on in music and film and visual art, especially painting. It gets going in 1966, so you're deep inside American involvement in Vietnam. You're inside of Civil Rights and the Great Society program, all the political assassinations taking place, and massive changes in the culture. I think what's often misunderstood about Language Writing is that it's presented as a kind of reactionary academic fact of poetry. It's really an extension of the New American Poetry as

anthologized in the Don Allen anthology [*New American Poetry, 1945-1960*, 1999], merged with anti-Vietnam war activism, and an intense interest in linguistic theory and literary theory, in an attempt to try to have a different relationship with politics show up in the work. All of those things are going to produce something that goes in a direction nobody can control.

MV: *Language Writing wants to forget lines and focus on word-units and their autonomy. It messes with syntax and expectation just like Stein would.*

AB: I think Language Writing is a point of differentiation because the influences of the Beats, Black Mountain [College], the Black Arts Movement, and the New York School were so heavily inside of a certain space. The people associated with them were also artistically really at odds with something like a literary establishment, while others were being courted by or absorbed into that establishment.

There's a way in which it's more interesting for me to think of Language Writing as a willful misunderstanding of second-generation New York School writing than as a point of opposition to the New York School. But then a lot of these people were also arguing, both publicly and privately. The Project is a place where readings took place by people involved in both parties. You could hear Charles Bernstein one week, but John Godfrey another. You could get these different takes. They're all way more overlapping than people realize. At the same time, all kinds of people who don't fit into these spaces are reading too, so it's always more complicated. The total fabric is always unseeable for anybody that's inside of it. And if you're outside, it isn't what anybody thinks it is either.

MV: *Do you still see the same energy at the Project today?*

AB: The Poetry Project has recently been good at recognizing how multimedia work and different types of cross-genre work overlap with poetry. The professionalization of poetry through MFA programs is also both a fact of the landscape in the country right now and a problem for the art, and it has to be treated as both at the same time. Simone White has been doing really interesting work by facilitating public conversations about that. She's tried to talk about "community" as a word people use all the time, but one that doesn't have any purchase unless you locate it within a set of factors and inside a landscape that can be really hard to control. Since the election, there are bigger, more focused crowds. People who are specifically coming in to listen to others talk about how they're reacting and responding to this massive political upheaval. They want to hear angles that they're not getting from media sources. That's been heartening to see.

What Is Poetry? Just Kidding, I Know You Know *(2017) is published by Wave Books and is available from Amazon and other online booksellers.*

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GABE DOZAL: GENERAL INTERIVEW

Gabe Dozal: In doing research for this interview I re-read the interview you had in *Poetry* with Bethlehem Shoals. This was an awesome conversation. I wish we could just reprint that conversation for Sonora.

Anselm Berrigan: Well, I'll tell you that it was little J.A. who compared me to Sarah Palin. Does that qualify as a scoop?

GD: Are you writing separate poems or one long poem? Like, do you see your work as separate entities or one long epic poem?

AB: I like the feeling that it's all one long poem — not an epic, but some kind of ludicrously scaled quilt. But in the writing the separate poems take their specific shapes, usually with very particular attitudes, and that feeling isn't really there. So the long quilt feeling is probably more like self-hypnosis, though I have a tendency to write a lot of poems that go together as individual poems while being parts of long works.

GD: When I hear the title of your book *Primitive State* I think

of artists who have worked with paint on canvas primitively: The Fauves, William De Kooning , or Joaquin Torres Garcia (an Uruguayan Artist influenced by De Stilj). My father is an artist, so I often find myself thinking about composition by field of images when I'm writing.

AB: There is this thing Edwin Denby, the poet and dance critic, wrote about de Kooning, that he "wanted everything in the picture out of equilibrium except, spontaneously, all of it." Converting that as a compositional desire from looking into listening is what I've wanted for the past few years. *Primitive State* might have been a step in that direction without my knowing it exactly. But by writing that I was trying to teach myself how to know the space of sentences better, & the title is a joke on my brain. But I'm glad for the way you hear it — and I saw a big show of Garcia's work last year, I think, at the Modern Museum in New York City, & thought it was fabulous. I was re-reading this interview with the painter Martin Wong the other day — he talked about wanting some of his paintings to have "no perspective," & I think sometimes about what that might be in writing. Because it has that sense of impossibility that something can start with.

GD: There's a shift in register tone modalities in your work that is really exciting to me.

AB: An old friend from the Bay Area, a poet and musician named Alex Cory, got me thinking about tone very particularly in 1994. He made me see that you had to figure out what it does by talking about it, about how to identify it, and that it might always be sliding out away from you. & I thought later that I

needed tone to be an open space, not closed.

GD: Tell me about your thoughts on singer/songwriter/troubadour Jonathan Richman.

AB: He's the Gilligan of Lou Reed's couch. My brother Eddie was interested in him for awhile, which is probably when I heard him the most, but I don't have a good feel for his music. Someone should write a piece comparing his Picasso/asshole rhyme with LL Cool J's Ayatollah/granola rhyme.

GD: Stephen Malkmus and Robert Pollard are in a song-writing contest. They have one hour to see who can write the most/best songs. At the end of the hour their songs will be judged on two criteria: amount of songs (1 points for each song) and then quality/merit of each songs (3 points for a great song, 2 points for a decent songs, 1 point for a shitty song). Who would have the most points at the end of the hour?

AB: Robert Pollard, and it's not even close. He's one of those people who knows how to write things fast. Somebody should have set up a recording session with him and the Wu-Tang Clan.

GD: High wire guy Karl Willenda said that "Life is on the wire, the rest is just waiting". When are poets on the wire? And when are we waiting?

AB: We're always on the wire. But it's also nothing. & definitely better than waiting around for something to happen. Joanne Kyger just died, and I felt so bad about it yesterday, I couldn't concentrate on anything. She just made the wire be part of the room, the atmosphere, something built in with everything

else, with its own shrine that doesn't take up much space.

GD: As a poet who has recently entered the conversation into poetry, I get a lot of my poetry news from twitter/blogs. There's a ton of polemical views on how poetry should be thought of, written or what's wrong with poetry. Help me parse this.

AB: I like it when anyone's trying to figure something out out loud and giving you a little room to go with them. Otherwise it's mostly static, & you take what's useful when it's useful and move on.

GD: You tweeted an alternative fact recently that *Wowee Zowee* is a wilder, stranger album than *Crooked Rain Crooked Rain*. I agree with this alternative fact.

AB: I think *Wowee Zowee* is an amazing mess, and that those guys were doing everything they knew how to do & didn't know how to do at the same time at that point. Like, "Grave Architecture" starts off with all this polish & then gradually comes apart, and then the next song really comes apart. But meanwhile a song like "Black Out" is a beautifully textured little song. It's their Philip Guston album — everything is coming together or coming apart.

GD: My favorite poem of your mothers is "Congratulating Wedge". It really helped me think about what a poem could do when I was first starting to think about poetry as an art from. It's the name of a Star Wars trading card. Was this your card?

AB: Mine or my brother's. We both had all the cards. I was

always worried Wedge would die.

GD: In the *Volta Book of Poets* your poetic statement is "No More Poetic Statement". Me and my cohort talk about this a lot for some reason.

AB: "No more poetics." You know, it's actually an allusion to something The Scarlet Witch said in House of M — she's a comic book character with reality-warping power, and she got mad at all mutants and said "No more mutants" — and a few million mutants lost their mutations. I was mad at poetics and wanted to see if I could make it evaporate as a racket.

GD: I like that your work is willing to meander and take its time. And it's porous too, it allows subjects to come and go. I feel like they aren't afraid to wander around, I never feel there is fear in your poetic voice or the voice of your poems. I've only read a few of the new rectangle poems in the BOMB and they're exciting for their language and form.

AB: Thank you. The rectangle poems, writing them, was this really bizarre thing at first that became joyous. It was so illogical and unpressured a thing to be doing, and then at the same time the form was clear and demanding in its own way. I loved writing them. I wrote them all out in public in different places.

GD: I often try and skirt intention when I'm writing, like I don't want to talk or write about myself directly. Ashbery said once, and I'm paraphrasing: "I wouldn't want to bore people with my own life." What role does intention play when you're writing/drafting?

AB: An undefined role. I wrote some poems recently that are direct imitations of some of Jim Brodey's work — specifically his "Panda Breath" poems, a lot of which are published in a book called *Heart of the Breath*, that came out posthumously. He'd name each poem after a friend, a hero or personal icon of some kind. So I wrote five poems in his form, which he chose to look like a kind of academic poem as he saw it maybe 30-35 years ago, but in which he'd try to explode the academic line, and I called them all "Jim Brodey". So that's a very specific set of intentions, right?

The intention to imitate so as to move, that's my kind of intention at the moment. I showed them to my mom who said she liked them but that they didn't have Jim's slurpy quality — that he had this side to him where he just wanted to lick everybody. You know, I couldn't deny that particular criticism. But I wanted to see what would happen, I wanted that possibility of change that comes with not being able to be somebody else but to try on some aspects as you've heard them, have them mingle with yours. And then I had to talk about myself, because I had to address Jim at points and I had to take responsibility for being present — when he was alive, when I was a kid and he was coming over a lot and having a hard time in his life — and in the poems. So, you know, intention that way can get to be a frame or an opening or a glimpse, and not necessarily something commanding or prescriptive.

GD: There's a lot of young international talent in the NBA right now: Antetokounmpo, Nikola Jokic, Porzingis. Have you seen Jokic play? And finally, next season would you be willing to be in a fantasy basketball league with myself and a few other MFA

candidates?

AB: I haven't really watched Jokic play — I've been hearing about him though — I listen to Zach Lowe's NBA podcasts to sort of follow the season through hearing journalists talk about it, and Jokic keeps coming up. But I have watched Antetokounmpo a little bit —watching him run the court with the ball is the closest thing I can think of in basketball terms to visualizing a fifth dimension. Porzingis is fabulous too — these guys have really great senses of time when they're on. But the Knicks are just such a demoralizing shitshow organizationally. They abuse their coaches, never have enough depth, and run-down their best players. It's crazy, though it's exactly what the Yankees were like in the 1980s under George Steinbrenner. He had to get banned from the game for a couple years for being a scumbag for the Yankees to turn things around, which is my way of saying the Knicks are screwed as long as James Dolan is in charge and unchanged.

I would be willing to consider being in that league. Let's talk about it. The one time I was in a NBA fantasy league I was the only person who paid attention, which was too similar to being a poet. So you might have to convince me...

Gabe Dozal is an MFA Candidate in Poetry at the University of Arizona. From El Paso, TX, he writes about the code-switching, camouflage, and chameleon nature of the borderlands.

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KATELYN PETERS: INTERVIEW WITH ANSELM BERRIGAN, POETRY EDITOR OF THE BROOKLYN RAIL

KP: I read a little bit about the history of the journal online. I am curious about the beginning of your work with the *Rail*. How did you become involved as the poetry editor at the *Rail*?

AB: I was directing the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church until Spring 2007. John Yau was the Arts Editor at the time; he has since left and writes for Hyperallergic. John asked if I was interested in the *Rail*. The poetry editor Monica de la Torre happened to be leaving, so I became the poetry editor in Spring 2008.

KP: I read that the *Brooklyn Rail* curates art exhibitions, panel discussions, reading series and film screenings. I subscribed to your mailing list but I was curious about past events that you have been involved with or any upcoming events that you know about.

AB: I am not involved in putting on events, but the *Rail* supports a number of different engagements, including talks and readings, and is sometimes involved in putting on events

directly. The publisher of the *Rail*, Phong Bui, has a very expansive idea of what it can do. There are other versions of the *Rail* that have started—in Miami and in Minneapolis I think. There have been a handful of books published jointly with Black Square Editions, John Yau's small press, when he was an editor. After Hurricane Sandy, Phong curated a huge exhibition with dozens of local artists to raise money for those artists whose studios and work were damaged by flooding from the storm. I was commissioned, among others, to write a poem for a joint reading. There was money raised for the show; it was meant to demonstrate solidarity, raise awareness and help the artists who have been directly affected by the storm.

KP: Brooklyn Rail Editions publishes books of poetry, experimental fiction, prose meditation, artists' writing, and interviews with artists, in addition to art and literary criticism. Do you contribute editorially to these publications?

AB: I have no editorial role in publishing books, but I have total autonomy in my role as the Poetry Editor. I am in contact with the staff at the Rail electronically. In the six years I have worked there, I have never been to the office. I was hired around the time my first daughter was born and I didn't have a lot of time. I am actually going into the office for the first time next week.

KP: In "A Brief History of the Brooklyn Rail," Theodore Hamm says, "As for any specific agenda aesthetically or politically, the *Rail* hasn't one: the editors control the content of their sections as they please. The *Rail* covers arts and politics but makes no demands that the twain must meet." What are your thoughts on this topic?

AB: That is an accurate description of my relationship to the *Rail* because I do have total autonomy over the poetry section.

There is no aesthetic or political agenda. I have never been given instruction as to how to do the section. Sometimes poets ask me if they should send me their books, but I have no involvement with the book review section. The poetry in the *Rail* is not reflected in the book reviews. The *Rail* covers political issues in the city that are and are not directly related to the art world. When artists read the *Rail*, they are getting another line of information. A journal can have a political consciousness, but not demand that the art serve illustratively for political issues. Art isn't art if it doesn't have autonomy. Many artists have serious political content outside of their art and it is either explicit or implicit in their art. If you want to get a broad sense of art in the city, you cannot limit content with an extraneous political agenda, or ask that artists or readers enter art in a certain way, with a bent towards the avant-garde or in a way that is reactionary.

KP: In the same piece of writing, Hamm says, "The *Rail's* real commitment is less to a program than to a place, or better yet, to a set of traditions that place represents." What is your relationship to Brooklyn?

AB: The journal is published out of Brooklyn and it has grown out of Brooklyn. I think many of the editors live in Brooklyn. I don't think the title would sound as interesting if it was called the *New York Rail*, but the audience is the whole city. The *Rail* has an international presence because of our web publication. There is more material on the web. There is a Brooklyn beat, but there is writing on the whole city in addition to local political writing. Decisions made in City Hall in Manhattan impact Brooklyn, but the *Rail* focuses on political issues specific to Brooklyn. But gentrification, education, police issues, etc. extend across the whole city. I think the impetus for making the publication

specific to Brooklyn is because the cultural ground of the city shifted to Brooklyn in the mid-nineties. The shift was tied up in gentrification: Manhattan was too expensive for artists who needed studio space moved to Williamsburg. In 1996, I moved from out west to Williamsburg and lived there for five years. At that time, there weren't throngs of people on Bedford Avenue and there were no big buildings on the waterfront. It was still affordable. Brooklyn has a long history; millions of people live there. There are lots of pockets to it. The current development boom, specifically the art boom over the last twenty years, hasn't put Brooklyn on the map. Brooklyn was already on the map. It is so big and so complex. Manhattan does a lot of work on the imagination because it is an island, it is a financial capital and houses so many institutions, but it is more known than unknown at this point. Gentrification has, of course, taken hold around Brooklyn and the other boroughs as well, and one wonders if New York can remain affordable for artists at all at this point.

KP: What is your commitment to publishing writing that is local to Brooklyn? Do you, at least in your poetry section, aim to represent what is contemporary in Brooklyn right now? I noticed that in the April 2014 issue of the *Rail*, you published CA Conrad, who lives in Philadelphia, but the other three poets you published are from New York.

AB: I am not counting numbers. Most writers who live in Brooklyn are not from Brooklyn. The print edition is a local publication. I mostly work read from people who are in New York, but I try to keep it an organic process. I am interested in putting together a section of strong, interesting material that changes from issue to issue. I have to work with what people send me. The poetry section isn't trying to make a map of a

scene. I am open to publishing people who are not published much and who are not located in New York, but who are making good work. I have ten deadlines a year. It is not like a journal that is published once a year. I try not to plan out the issues too much because things come in all the time. I don't want to feel constrained.

KP: Do you mind if I ask about your own poetic life? How long have you written poems?

AB: I've been writing poems since the spring of 1991. I started writing little prose pieces the year before, and concurrently wrote poetry and prose for another two years before giving myself over to poetry completely.

KP: What poets do you like?

AB: There are too many to name. At this point I'm more interested in poems than in poets—or it can feel that way enough of the time. John Coletti's poem "Evident Source", for instance, is on my mind—it's just gone up on-line. And I can't get past what's going on in the first five pages of Fred Moten's poem "Block Chapel" from his book The Feel Trio because I get stopped and want to open my notebook. So I haven't gotten too far in the book. Writing this way makes me think I must be wanting to be interrupted. That doesn't have to only be a total stop—to be stopped completely—but a test of one's own limits. Taste, for instance, is a self-imposed limit, and ultimately a form of cop out. Hoa Nguyen sent me five poems to consider for the Brooklyn Rail, and told me she didn't think they went together, which was great, because why should poems go together?

KP: In my program we are studying the New York School of Poets (and the relationship they had with the abstract expressionist painters of the 1950s and 1960s). I know a little bit about

your lineage: what do you think about this classification and the naming of a second generation on New York School Poets?

AB: I respect the term and its jokey complexities and evasions as it relates to the first and second generations. The first generation bleeds into the second generation more messily for me than for most people. Frank O'Hara is as much as second generation New York school poet as first, once you get around to acknowledging how porous a classification this is. The second generation probably ought to include some of the West Coast L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers, and Bruce Andrews. Many people would be disgusted by this idea, but a smart, sensitive, slightly fucked up writer could make the case. In a longer view, you could probably name Dante as the first New York School writer, followed by Gertrude Stein, then Williams and Edwin Denby. Coleridge was a New York School poet when he wrote "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison". David Henderson and Lorenzo Thomas were instructors at the building-less campus, and so on. Having grown up in New York City and having attended public schools in New York City and New York State for my entire formal education, I have too much direct experience to be part of the New York School.

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BERRIGAN AND DURAND INTERVIEW EACH OTHER

Anselm Berrigan: What do you think of the possibility that one's poetics, for lack of a better term, do not have to come primarily out of poetry, or philosophy for that matter? I'm thinking of a letter I received from my stepfather about five years ago, in which he suggested that a personal poetics could just as easily come out of geography, history, music, many other places — and your poems are pretty clearly informed by yr sense of structure, be it through civic planning or abstract visual art.

Marcella Durand: I'd strongly, in fact, I'd inevitably agree with your stepfather. There's no reason to separate poetry from the rest of the arts, or from life, science. I find these other areas so fertile for ideas in form/content. It's really exciting to try and integrate, say, how a water pipe is built for a city of millions into the form and idea of a poem. And wouldn't this kind of "inspiration" be incredibly pertinent to life? I have this weird hope that someone, Joe Schmoe or Jane Doe, would read one of my matter-oriented poems with not much in them

about psychology & interpersonal relations, or intrapersonal relations, and say, "Hey! That's about my drinking water!" To think about what's happening around your body when you live in a big city, or just a world filled with all sorts of moving things in seeming chaos. And maybe then people will develop more of a spatial sense of responsibility. It drives me wild how spatially irresponsible Americans are (to grossly generalize). Like these developments and malls are just so badly placed in physical space. People want to escape their bodies and material space, and I want to drag them back. To somewhat digress, I went to see this fantastic show at the NYPL on scientific illustration, and saw a drawing by Descartes — claustrophobic renditions of atoms in vortexes. The accompanying blurb said that Descartes was actually incredibly close to solving the laws of motion, but he didn't because he would not accept the existence of voids. And speaking of voids, one thing I find incredibly interesting in your poetry is their spaciousness on the page — you have voids between lines and words and poems that utilize the entire space of the paper, a real generosity to the page & word. I'm thinking particularly of the "Position of Planets on the Human Forehead" where these voids and spaces add a "constellation" of shadings ...

AB: I derive a great deal of comfort and solace from voids, and the idea of an abyss. Voids are hard to colonize, and since they generally freak people out, there's a certain increase in elbow room if you stick around. But I tend to think that the whole page is available so why not use it; it buzzes me to work with the line, as it's placed, in a gestural mode from time to time, free of breaks indicated by thought, breath, or syntax (not in opposition to those methods, however). "A spatial sense of responsibility"

is intriguing. I love the fact that Silicon Valley, which is in some respects the backbone of the so-called American economic boom, is located on this tremendous fault line that seismologists have been indicating for the last decade is going to produce a monster earthquake within the next twenty-five years. I'm not sure how you mean shadings, but I would be interested to know what you think that might mean, vis-a-vis poems.

MD: Well, the most basic root of America's spatial incompetence is that they/we stole the land in the most brutal, unfair, low-down ways possible. But the U.S. also has a tradition of ecological awareness and appreciation of "encounters with the wilderness" that definitely comes from both the overwhelming physicality of the land and influence of the native tribes. Cabeza de Vaca, Willa Cather, Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, Sarah Orne Jewett, Black Elk, Aldo Leopold are some earlier American writers who wrote with a particularly interesting spatial consciousness. I just finished *Cape Cod* by Thoreau where he experiences nature in a full-frontal (literally at times!) way that I just don't think is possible anymore, at least, not where I live! Douglas gave me this book about the Grand Canyon which talks about how the early Spanish conquistadors who first saw it were unable to perceive it; their previous experience did not allow them to really see the magnificence and enormity of it. We've become able to perceive nature — Thoreau looks and looks into the darkness until his pupil becomes large enough to see — and what's happened after that moment of perception? I'm being rather retro in my poetical aims by trying to drag back a sense of unpredictability, but I'm also trying to encompass, or maybe perceive, the industrial, genetic, and silicon revolutions. But I want to ask you more about your lines and voids — I'm

quite intrigued by your line "free of breaks indicated by thought, breath, or syntax." Could you talk about that more? And also what you mean by "gestural mode"? Maybe that will coincide with what I mean by "shadings."

AB: I lean toward the belief that this world is a shadow of the real world, that you can, as I have been made to understand that Crazy Horse would, dream yourself into the real world. I had a dream the other night that my father, who has been dead since 1983, came walking up to me and said that he hadn't been dead, he'd just had a really bad back. I have not formalized these distinctions, and do not plan to do so, although Will Alexander knows of some Sufi dream techniques that I may want to experiment with later in some form of life. I leave wide open the possibility that this world is not the real world. But I'm interested in this world as a subject for poems. I had an interesting experience once, which suggested to me that the dimension which we take ourselves to reside in is rather thin, and could be torn away as if wallpaper. Anyway, the "free of breaks ..." thing, I was thinking of *Projective Verse*, and the Ginsberg variations on it, as he would explain them; i.e., the end of a breath or thought marking where the line should end, and the possibilities for shaping within those parameters (one line actually equating to four or five, etc., with the breaks inside the line being determined by where thoughts end or pause). I'm not sure that thought or breath is an adequate structural basis for a line of poetry a lot of the time. I was also thinking of non-conventional syntax as not being a terribly interesting method of generating poetic energy. "Gestural mode" is probably my attempt to explain line choices within poems by not explaining them but suggesting a frame. I haven't ever been able to discern

that the position of being an intellectual or anti-intellectual has anything to do with intellect. So I take back asking you about shadings. Mainly I'm interested in the arrangement, less so the method reflected by the arrangement. Has the telephone ever helped you to write a poem?

MD: No. The telephone is an evil invention and I stay away from it and all associated with it as much as possible. I do, however, adore e-mail.Yes, I can see in your work that you would be operating within a frame that happens to engage the entire page, rather than prescribed linebreaks, and that the frame also comes from an engagement & connection with collaboration and reading aloud. I think what I mean by shading, is what comes thru this engagement from life and people and how this transfers to the page. I think we both came to poetry simultaneously early and late, if you know what I mean, and in your work, you have a particularly "real" (a real connection with the shadow?) presence that comes from a more extended exploration of "other" careers. This goes back as well to being interested in how other areas can feed into poetry. But what do you mean by "non-conventional syntax as not being a terribly interesting method of generating poetic energy"? What does generate your poetic energy then? The real world behind the shadow world? The crystal cigarette under the cigarette? I remember reading something about your mom saying that it's not the words or the syntax that makes a poem interesting...do you agree with that? Let's get mystical. And to return to syntax, I'll be ornery and disagree with you. Some of the most fun moments I've had is while twisting syntax up — I like driving down that road of a sentence and turning away at the last minute — playing chicken with nouns and verbs. That's why I love

Joe Elliot's work — that he'll take some phrase like "You gotta go in it's the big game" but he'll take out the comma, and do something else with the next line that screws with that corny phrase. So let's talk about mysticism and let's talk about subject-verb agreement.

AB: Oh, no, I feel skinned! Well, that was a stressful day when I responded. I think the non-conventional-syntax thing, I dislike being beaten over the head with it as much as being beaten over the head with poems that are really prose with line breaks. I don't think about it when I write. Energy comes from words and the unknown, and the space between them? No. It is possibly unwise for me to try and locate that energy, or even to refute other sources of energy. I've been feeling unwise since September of 1999, before that I felt neutral. I feel much ack. I thought I was on my way to being a journalist until I wrote a poem. I considered at various times, marine biology (because I was fascinated by sharks as out of the evolutionary loop in a strange way), sports broadcasting, short-story writing, political science, as possible life choices for work, but never for very long. I would often like to change my name to seven-of-nine. Some questions: How much time do you spend under artificial light?

MD: I know in your borg state, time is merely an excuse, so I suggest that you definitely change your name. I thought of artificial light while watching an episode of Star Trek: Voyager. That poor crew is always under artificial light. They live in dislocation. Star Trek is a utopian ideal of human society: multiracial, multispecies, feminist, with miraculous medicine and technology, where "humanity" exists in everyone and everything — even holograms and nebulae. But Starfleet is

militaristic and hierarchical: everyone answers to the "captain" with unquestioning devotion. A recurring quirk of all the Star Trek captains is the assumption that the crew will accomplish insane tasks within short periods of time. The borg are really the "logical" extension of the Starfleet way (incredibly orderly, devoted, collective), but they are visually "unclean." The drones are gooey-looking, the machinery is green and black, the borg hallways are claustrophic and dirty. So what's our future? Borg or Starfleet? Birds don't really hate me. I feed the little sparrows seeds on my fire escape. And I grow little plants that bees and birds like. But birds do hate owls. Owls are hated by all birds. Eagles and hawks may be hated by other birds too. Blue jays as well, I think, are not too popular with the smaller bird population. I don't know what language I speak in between spaces because I am in another state, perhaps the same as your "unwiseness" and your "ack." The crystal Marcella would know, but she's not around right now.Who are Dalziel and Stamper? What are you going to do with that porno lesbian Berrigan novel? In fact, please reveal your secret plagiarization techniques. Tell us how you use comic-book physical event exclamations (whap, pow, argh) to punctuate your poetry.

AB: How the fuck should I know how I plagiarize? Those guys are liars under my employ. I have nothing to pay them, except for the repetition of their names in certain circles. In the one hand prestige and cultural capital, in the other death and poverty, and I'm putting it down, but you're not picking it up. Not you, though. When did you learn how to read?

MD: Interesting to ponder to what extent plagiarism is a good career move. It occurs to me plagiarization is the purest homage

to writers and the act of writing ever invented. Also, I don't quite understand the term "cultural capital" that you use. Are you referring to living in NY? I learned to read when my best friend learned to read before me and I was jealous. I'd like to return to the idea of art and poetry, and I would dare say that both of us have been inordinately interested in and influenced by art throughout our tender years in this cultural capital. Who are some artists you particularly admire and why? Do you ever plagiarize artistic structures, colors, composition? I know I do. I would like to make poems that are like Rodchenko paintings, or Ad Reinhardt. I would like to do the black poems. Or Franz Kline poems.

AB: I've always been fascinated by an idea that by putting a color in a poem, it might trigger in the reader's mind their most vivid association or memory or sense of that color. Even if the color in the poem is describing some other object, like Williams' red wheelbarrow. It's his red wheelbarrow, and I can see his red wheelbarrow, but I also see my own red when I see the word "red" there in the poem. So then I think of artists sometimes in terms of a color that has stayed with me, like some of Joan Mitchell's blues, and a purple silkscreen of Warhol's that I saw at the Albright-Knox in Buffalo. It's an electric chair, and it's one of the most striking artworks I've ever seen, and the richness of the color combined with the fact of an electic chair and its function have a lot to do with why it still rings my head. I love Warhol's tone as created by his silkscreens, though I don't know that I can articulate what I get from it very well. A lot of the artists I admire are my friends, and that's a lot of art, to tell the truth.Using art structures is an interesting idea. I never think about doing that. I've written

out of paintings before, and I've thought about different styles, so it gets in there somewhere. I could look at a lot of action paintings for days on end. And I've imagined in a poem, a face made to look like some of the gold tempura Byzantine wood panels. My face, actually, with little demons and monks painted on it. It's funny, the painters I know, older and younger, tend to pay more attention to what poets are doing than most other folks, including a lot of poets. But getting back to structures, I would say I still feel like there's a lot of collage-type space to mine for word arrangements. I'm probably less interested in letting the seams show while collaging words than I used to be, but I still do it all the time. And I'm also interested in making poems that are still-lifes, figuratively speaking, and not boring. Cultural or symbolic capital is something discussed recently on the Poetics List at Buffalo, and it seems to be very subjectively defined. My father, for instance, has a lot of cultural capital by some folks' measure, even though he died broke with much of his work out of print. I take it to mean a kind of intangible capital created by other people's perception of your work and/or life. Like, you can't necessarily count up your own cultural capital, someone has to do it for you. It's like having a type of nothing that other people want. Some might say that you and I are raising our level of cultural capital by having this interview printed in Gary's zine. The most amazing piece of art I've seen in the last couple of years was the Williamsburg Bridge, when the new walkway opened while the subway tracks were still under construction. All the graffiti, the bright red walkway rail, all the layers of metal with the city and the river coming through them. It totally knocked me out all last spring and summer, and I would walk over it whenever I could. I have probably talked too much now. So my question really is, can you now say a lot

of things in response to all the art stuff?

MD: The words "left-justified" and "right-justified" were bandied about today and I'd actually like to explore that more in terms of using art structures, which you say you've never thought about, but perhaps in a more innate way, you have absorbed in terms of using the page. Also, you talk about letting the seams show in your poems, which in a way, I think is perhaps a more "artistic" way of looking at a poem in that you're conceiving of a poem as a built composition in which seams can show. I guess where I'm getting to is poetry as a compositional space and what you think of that in terms of what you're doing in your own work. I agree with you that the Williamsburg Bridge is an amazing piece of art in that it achieves this sensurround experience that unites the perceiver with urban space — what is achieved in my perceptions and sensations of space after walking through and on the bridge is what many artists dream of doing. Actually, that sort of experience was in my head while I was writing *City of Ports* — actually, just today, for some reason, I was thinking about how much I enjoyed writing that series — that the compositional process that I went thru was so enjoyable, that I felt like I was walking, working, and writing thru so many interesting spaces, I mean, I didn't just feel like that — I was literally walking, working and writing thru various spaces! I was working, let's see, one day I counted up 8 different jobs I was doing that day, in all sorts of areas of the city. I was teaching in Williamsburg, copy editing at night in mid-town and the Village, working at Brooklyn College, writing articles where I was traveling thru places like Brownsville, back and forth over all these bridges and waterfronts (since I don't take the subway) and writing *City of Ports* during this, on buses, and during stolen

moments at offices, waiting for copy. I loved writing that way — that sort of fragmentation and preciousness of time/space and continual production secretly in the faces of authority — that anyone and everyone can write like that, that writing can fit into the spaces of our lives and emanate from those various components — work, travel, journeys, errands, bus rides, ill-lit office desks ...

AB: When I lived in San Francisco and worked as a foot messenger I used to write between deliveries and pick-ups. On the bus, on the corners, in the elevators, etc. It was a great terrible job. I would smoke pot and go to work and write and read, all while wearing this uniform of navy blue collared tee with California Overnight logo over heart and tan khakis, plus beeper, walkie-talkie, and giant silver hand-truck. Then I got hepatitis and turned yellow and had no sick days or health insurance or anything. Not much fun. About half of the poems that are in this little chapbook called *They Beat Me Over the Head with a Sack* were written while I was sick and delusional at home, and while I was sick and delusional at work because I couldn't afford to stay home and be sick in bed. The poems aren't explicitly about those circumstances, but they inform every line in the poems in some way. There are life-readings of all those poems, and probably of every poem I've ever written that would ultimately be the most precise readings that could be done of them. However, that doesn't mean they're always the most necessary readings, though often they are. The compositional space I operate out of is living, and ideas related to artifice, language, form, etc. I take to be encapsulated within that space, so that it's completely open as to what a poem can do, or be. I feel close to something Philip Whalen wrote in one of his poems, that he wanted freedom

for and from everybody.