

## DOCUMENTS

### in search of the poetic in everyday life

by Vincent Tinguely

In the spring of 1986 I was working in a parking lot in Halifax, living with a woman and writing. I wrote prose and I wrote poetry. Sometimes I wrote something that fell in between the two...especially when I was stoned. Writing stoned was something I did a lot of that year, something that I haven't done a lot of since...that was a special year. The capacious parking lot booth was my studio, equipped with a portable typewriter, a ghetto blaster and a near-endless supply of cheap grass. I'd made a promise to myself, that year, that I was going to work, I was going to pay my debts, I was going to write, and I was going to smoke as much pot as I pleased—which was *a lot*.

I just wanted to bash away at the stoney face of our deathly Canadian 'culture' with a mallet, day and night, I wanted to *shed it*...Farley Mowat and Pierre Berton, The Beachcombers, hockey, anything on any commercial radio station anywhere (Teaze, Trooper, Toronto, Triumph, etcetera), CBC radio and TV look-down-your-nose-at-me commentators and experts, everything was crap...this militaristic, regimented, by-the-book society was bananas...I honed my writer soul staring at the night reflection of my face in the plastic window of the parking lot booth, blasting joint after joint, exuding unconscious sludge onto the page.

What I was doing wasn't happening in a vacuum; I knew a tiny number of others who had launched themselves into the creative realm without benefit of a school curriculum. Some were musicians (like The Dub Rifles, originally out of Winnipeg, or closer to home, people like Rebecca and Mia, Eric, Curph, who played guitar, shared their songs and never made a name for themselves); some were visual artists like Hugh Orr, my best friend at the time, and Renée Forrestall, who had her own extremely contentious relationship with institutes of higher education, and from whom both Hugh and I gleaned much in terms of art, aesthetics and the beginnings of a critique of the world we found ourselves in.

In my case, I'd already attained a degree in history from U.W.O., and it had only nearly cost my mind, my spirit and my life. I'd dropped out of a

second degree in journalism (U. of King's College) when it became clear that I was just going through the motions...eventually I had to ask myself, what would be the point of getting a degree despite the fact that my heart was entirely not in it? So I just walked away from schools in general...the majority of my effort went into simply *becoming what I wanted to be*.

That spring, Hugh was in Montréal living on poge. We traded enormous letters running to 20 and 30 pages, concerning our ever-expanding and constantly-mutating concepts of art, life and everything else. If I consider the source of my aesthetics at the time, I'm applying hindsight to a process that was entirely unconscious at the time. I remember going to see Ron Mann's film *Poetry In Motion*, which was released around the same time I first started writing poems to while away the hours in the parking lot booth. But I didn't make a conscious connection between seeing the film (at Halifax's local rep cinema), and writing poetry, until decades later. Similarly, I was steeped in alternative, underground music culture—a cross-genre witch's brew of reggae, punk rock, industrial, experimental noise, folk that eventually led to the production of campus radio shows. I read voraciously, mining the rich veins of Beat and avante-garde traditions. Friends traded books, mixed tapes, LPs freely amongst themselves. There was no 'alternative' bar scene in Halifax—it was all still Top 40 cover bands and Irish Jig music—so we inhabited a sort of loft / apartment / jam space netherworld.

We beavered away at our works, my poems and stories, Hugh's drawings, paintings and sculptures, because they were, as Hugh once said, "The universe." For us, art wasn't a job or a career, it was everthing. We'd already passed through that desperate moment when one realizes this life we're being handed is a crock of shit—it 'administers' everything to death. It comes swooping around from this angle then that, trying to insinuate itself into everything good about existence: Desire. Love. Beauty. Art. To quote one of Peter's poems, "It moves like a razor predator." We'd chosen the revolutionary path of confounding it with our own concepts, our own universes.

Really, it puzzles me why we hadn't gone the route of the schools. One term at NSCAD had been enough to turn Hugh off formal art education for good. In my case, I guess I modelled myself on Kerouac, who just went ahead and wrote books. It seemed to make sense at the time; write a book, then if it's good enough, someone will publish it. If I had realized how difficult a task that really is, maybe I'd have tried a different route. More likely, I'd have given up. But none of this explains the real sense of joy, of release, of *rightness* that this 'going ahead and doing it' brought in its

wake. I had already established that there was no rational reason to exist in this farrago of power and fear we call 'society'...going around crushing each other day and night...better to try to escape it somehow. One could always drink, of course, but hallucinogens added an even greater freight of daring to the mix. Getting drunk to escape is bullshit anyway, this whole society is drunk out of its skull all the time...the great killing machine and its dutch courage.

So the problem was this: what could I do to make my life more bearable? I'd been burdened for years by a feeling that I just didn't cut it at all...I wasn't up to the challenge...I was just going through the motions...what a relief, then, to just drop everything and write!

Hugh and I exchanged cassette tapes as well as letters, that spring. One of his tapes featured excerpts from the 1980 *Vehicule Poets LP Sounds Like...* I was enchanted by the voices of Pat Walsh, Ken Norris, Claudia Lapp, Peter Van Toorn and Endre Farkas, among others. Like many of Hugh's tapes, there was no playlist included, so part of the magic of listening was the mystery of *Who These People Were*. "Omnivashivaya, omnivashivaya, omnivashivaya, omnivashivaya..."<sup>1</sup> On another tape he used his Professional Recording Walkman to tape Peter Copping, a new friend of his who happened to be a poet. Peter's words...I was simply floored by his poem, 'Hitler by T.B. Hitler.' It was a poem that Hugh and I would have deemed 'perfect', in the sense that it perfectly meshed with our own sensibilities at the moment when we first heard it. It meshed, it became part of us, it helped name some part of ourselves which until then had been nameless.

Peter's poem was like a miniature encyclopedia of all the great features of poetry: vivid imagery, musicality, rhythm, intensity, insight, the power of simple repetition, the unifying power of the theme. Even the way he accepted his own 'mistakes'—typos, illegibility—into the flow of his reading taught me something. Peter seemed to be inhabiting a poetic sensibility, a headspace where I wanted to go. In his letters, Hugh fed my sense of inadequacy, my jealousy, with romantic stories of Peter's poetic life on the streets of Montreal's Plateau district. By the time I flew to Montreal for a week-long visit in June, I was hungry to simply soak up everything I could from his hard-won poetry skills.

While I was living quietly, scribbling in the parking lot booth, loving, drifting benignly through the tight-knit creative community of Halifax, Hugh had found the sort of underground bohemia I'd only ever known in books. I have memories of candle lit sessions of song round the kitchen table, the passing of the joint and the bottle of red wine, forays to tiny clubs

like Station 10 and the Petit Campus to dance to Three O'Clock Train and The Nils; there are memories of angry lovers, of sad lovers, of lovers soaking together in the big old bath tub...through all this the presence of Peter wove itself. Peter, offering to buy me a coffee at the corner of Ste-Catherine and St-Laurent, and when I agreed he immediately set about panhandling until he had enough change. Peter, flirting with a beautiful woman in Dunkin Donuts as evening gave way to dawn. Peter and Hugh playing a leisurely game of chess under a wrought-iron moon face that guarded the front windows of a hippie café on St-Denis. Peter, taking his mock-Shakespearean leave from Hugh's apartment, calling farewells from the veranda, from the spiral stairs, from the alleyway below, until his voice faded away into the distance as he meandered home.

Peter's home, in a tenement almost directly beneath the Jacques Cartier bridge, was an utter shambles. Hugh brought me down to his apartment on the day Peter was scheduled to give a poetry reading, and I found it exactly as described in Hugh's letters. The door, kicked in so many times by various junkie 'friends' who wanted a place to flop that it remained permanently open to all and sundry. The apartment, musty, more like a camp than a dwelling place, the sad old mattresses on the floors, dishevelled bedclothes, wretched furnishings. There was absolutely nothing left of value in the apartment. Anything that could be sold had been stolen. We brought coffee in foam cups from a greasy spoon on Ste-Catherine East because he couldn't even keep food in his apartment, it would be stolen. Peter was a saint, he loved these people...in the midst of the decrepitude, the disarray, the destruction of any sense of past or future, there sat Peter in the kitchen by the rickety little table. He was suffused with a holy light. Next to him, on the table, was a pile of papers a foot high. His poems. Poems written and poems typed. Poems scribbled on greasy menus, poems inscribed on lined foolscap, poems jotted on torn scraps. Peter was nervously trying to decide which poems to read. 'Just pick some at random,' Hugh said, and then we went out on the balcony to sip the coffee we'd brought. We stared up through lines of hanging laundry to the bottom of the great humming bridge. A thin Québécoise in a tattered grey jersey, one of Peter's roommates, came onto the balcony to bum a cigarette. When she'd drifted away I asked Hugh, 'Is that the one who dumped an ashtray on Peter's face when he was asleep?'

'That's her,' Hugh said.

We hiked to the Brewery Mission for supper, then northward to Hugh's apartment, where we smoked a fat joint before heading out for the poetry reading on Berri Street. Montreal was ripe with summer energies, colourful

crowds constantly poured forth from the Mont-Royal metro entrance. The nearly naked bodies had an intoxicating effect. Hugh went about everywhere shirtless, revelling in his youth. Peter went around with a sports jacket over a shirt and undershirt, his black hair cut short. I wore a t-shirt and jeans and I sweated and sweated. But I remember, more than anything else, how happy I was, then.

The poetry reading had been organized by his poet friend Artie.<sup>2</sup> Artie was there at 4001 Berri when we arrived, beautifully dishevelled in a white shirt and jeans, looking stressed out and distracted.

‘I wonder if anyone will come?’ Peter asked the air.

I said, ‘Did you put up any posters?’

Peter nodded. ‘Yeah, Artie put one up at The Word...it’s a used bookstore...and there was another one too, somewhere.’ I looked at Hugh and smiled.

A handful of people had gathered outside the brick building on Berri. Hugh and I started out sitting on the sidewalk, leaning our backs on the wall; as time passed our positions became more and more horizontal, until we were completely sprawled across the sidewalk. Artie became more and more agitated—it transpired that there had been a miscommunication, a mistake, something had gone wrong, and the room where the reading was supposed to take place was booked for something else that night. The absurdity of the situation struck me then...here was a handful of people—three poets and their closest friends—standing on the sidewalk, wondering where to hold a poetry reading. ‘Well, why not right here?’ I suggested. ‘Have the reading on the street. Why not? This is nice.’

And it *was* nice. The sun was setting, and sent slanting rays all down Berri Street. The apartment houses were dappled in shadow with bright sunlit patches. The foilage of the trees seemed to pulsate. Everything was glowing.

‘I’m comfortable,’ Hugh said. ‘Come on, let’s have some poetry!’

‘Wait, wait!’ Artie said, holding up one hand. ‘Before we begin, I have a good friend coming. I know he’s coming. But he’s not here yet, and we can’t start without him.’

I set about making a fresh batch of cigarettes with my cigarette machine. I sent Peter to the corner store with ten dollars for a few cans of beer. Presently a Mercedes pulled up to the curb, and out stepped Leonard Cohen and his companion, a young woman armed with a camera. Artie’s friend had arrived! Artie hastily explained the situation, said he hoped Leonard didn’t mind having the poetry reading out on the sidewalk like this. Leonard didn’t mind. He sat, smiling, on a cement step.

Hugh and I exchanged conspiratorial glances at each other. Before Hugh had left Halifax for Montreal, we'd discovered Leonard Cohen's early albums in the record library of the campus radio station. That same fall, I'd picked up *The Spice Box of Earth* at a bazaar for fifty cents—it was probably the first poetry I'd voluntarily read in my life. His words, music and voice had entered our personal mythic voyage in search of the poetic in everyday life, and now here he was, wearing a blue suit, sitting on a cement step a few feet away from us. We kept checking him out, trying to be subtle about it. Then I caught him checking us out. He looked away quickly, as if embarrassed by his shocking display of natural curiosity. Leonard Cohen was shy!

The reading was underway. Peter went first, and he read one poem: 'Hitler by T.B. Hitler.' Of course, it wasn't a poem in favour of Hitler or praising Hitler, but—like some of Cohen's poems about Hitler, poems Peter had probably read—it was a poem about the Hitler in all of us. It was a probe into what was human about Hitler, what he shared, psychologically, ontologically, emotionally, with the rest of humanity. What it was about him that we knew deeply, secretly, about ourselves—what we knew and didn't want to know. It was a poem about power and the love of power.

This is only a Nazi regime as it was  
That is, only a Nazi regime on a smaller scale  
That is  
Only a Nazi regime by the way it looks  
Only a Nazi regime in the way it runs  
But the men and girls in it have softer hearts for the Nazis  
Than for themselves<sup>3</sup>

He read to Leonard Cohen. He put everything into it, it was a fine reading, and at the end of it, Cohen nodded slightly, approvingly.

Artie followed with a sheaf of poems about the nature of love. Love of man for woman. He seemed to be attacking this idea of love, and he looked at his friend on the cement step as if he were addressing an argument to him. Smiling wryly, shaking his head good-naturedly, Leonard Cohen didn't agree with Artie.

Both Peter and Artie had chosen to kneel on the hard cement of the sidewalk as they read. It lent a sense of drama to the reading—of course, Cohen was seated, and Hugh and I were listening and watching from an almost completely supine position, so in a sense they were only trying to connect with their audience members. The third poet stood and delivered a series

of poems that made no impression on me. I listened, but only politely. I can't to this day remember who he was.<sup>4</sup>

The sun had gone down further, the poets and audience were mingled together in the shadows of dusk. The trees sang their susurrus as friends took their leave. 'This was the best poetry reading I've ever been to,' Leonard Cohen declared. And then we all went our separate ways. I went back to Halifax with the inescapable feeling that my life had been altered forever. In a matter of weeks, I was looking at my first published poem in a local monthly zine.

Let me consecrate this moment  
Declare this city holy  
A glow of womanly mystery lay on our hands today—  
All seasons passed like a flickering magic sideshow  
Spring blossoms, metallic blue of summer sky  
The sharp fall breeze  
And the winter grey clouds  
Dropping ice on sunlit sidewalks.

Let me be a living god  
Bestow grace on this city of pyramids  
Give me the power to cast a mighty spell—  
In your honour  
Open the eyes of inhabitants who seem to race  
Like stop-motion film images  
Who would know god  
If they could only see  
The blazing tree behind the hotel  
Waving to me  
A living explosion of green love  
And beyond, a shaft of sunlight  
Invokes a wedge of rainbow  
Framed by low brick buildings  
Iron sky over Dartmouth  
Shivering spray of leaves  
For my pleasure

Let me call together disciples  
We'll celebrate  
Some will write songs and sing out  
Others will paint windows into the future  
Some will sit in dark rooms  
And wait for death to end their solitude

Some will embrace and make love  
 Others stab cabbies and prostitutes  
 We will all be legends  
 A city of love and death  
 The finest young members of society  
 Sacrificed on makeshift altars at the top of  
 Glass towers  
 While the mad and the maimed dance in the streets  
 Together we'll invoke some changes  
 As the sun calls the seed  
 As hydrogen calls the fire  
 So this city will meet its destiny  
 In the holy dawn<sup>5</sup>

### Notes

- 1 A traditional devotional song performed by Claudia Lapp on the LP entitled, *Sounds Like: Sound Poetry by 8 Montreal Poets* (Vehicule, 1980).
- 2 Artie Gold was a well-known charter member of the Vehicule Poets. At the time I met him in 1986, however, I didn't know him from Adam, and I promptly forgot his name. Much later, when I was researching the Vehicule Poets for *Impure: Reinventing the Word* (conundrum press, 2001, written with Victoria Stanton) and conducted interviews with members Ken Norris and Endre Farkas, I still didn't realize it was actually Artie Gold of the Vehicules that I had met. This realization only came in the summer of 2008, when I read a selection of Gold's poetry in *The Beautiful Chemical Waltz*. There was a moment when I sat back and said, "Of course, it was *him*."
- 3 I've transcribed this text from the recording that I have. The line breaks are mine, as I have no way of knowing what they were originally (if there were any at all!). I know Peter Copping had at least one poem published in the mid-eighties, in a small literary zine. It was a poem he had written entirely in the margins of a cheap pocket book, because he'd had nothing else to write on at the time of inspiration. I don't remember the name of the zine. At the time I moved to Montreal in 1992, I met Peter a few times. He'd quit writing. I haven't seen him since 1994.
- 4 Really! The mystery of this third poet's identity might be solved if a) Artie Gold's poster for this reading somehow survived – maybe it's among his papers recently deposited with the McLennan library; or b) Adrian King-Edwards, the proprietor of The Word bookstore, has any recollection of this event; or c) Leonard Cohen has any memory of it.
- 5 Written in the parking lot booth where I worked—many of the images are what I saw outside its windows that day. First published in *New Works*, July/August 1986, Halifax.