

No Gender: Reflections on The Life and Work of kari edwards

Verbing

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By Marcus Civin

kari edwards and I were neighbors at the Old Sears Building on Cesar Chavez Street in San Francisco. kari would walk briskly down the hall, stop, and knock on my door.

“Who’s there?” I would ask.

“Who do you want it to be?”

kari was always bringing in a bunch of small press publications, or headed to the post office with a stack of manuscripts. kari felt clarity of purpose and real desire to communicate.

One night, Lyn Hejinian e-mailed that kari’s work, *short sorry*, would be included in The Best American Poetry of 2004. Celebrating, drinking wine with kari and Fran, sitting on the painted-light-blue-wood-steps to kari’s writing loft, I remember kari, flirting with Fran, sort of purring, catching words right as they came out, taking them back in, to turn them around, reposition them. kari re-defined my concept of language:

... What is it to lose language?... Language creates stereotypes. All language is, in some form, oppressive... We live in a binary system: ...it’s like: good/bad, right/wrong... Our choices are pretty much: be diagnosable, or man or woman, or straight or queer, or... There’s always this binary approach to it. And nouns freeze things too... Once you’re ‘it’, whatever that ‘it’ is, whether it’s Trans, male, dog, or rock, you’re frozen there. Living to me is more like a verb, but I don’t have the verb that does it... It’s not a noun anymore, it’s more like verbing...

iduna, by kari edwards, is a score for a performance of unfreezing. *iduna* realizes a strategy for verbing. Stretching beyond the gestural presentation of words, *iduna* uses words as a temporal score. To activate this book, the reader must play it the way a musician plays a score. Notations flow around, behind and through stanzas. The reader will move between pages, turn upside down, act sideways. Eileen Tabios was moved to compare *iduna*’s thick-jeweled-expanse to flesh:

The verses are presented, but each page is no longer a one-dimensional field. Each page has become a layered space through a backdrop of other text printed in lighter tones; the background marks create layers to evoke depth from what is usually the flatness of a page. But the space is not “white space” -- it is the mussed up space of flesh that’s shown a lot of living: wrinkles, scars, bruises, love marks, orgasmic stains, lost teeth, calluses...
... scabs, acne, hair, burns, glass cut, lovesick... Flesh staggers, just one alternative shocking reality to the oppressive stereotypes of language. kari writes:

“The Physical Flesh Is A Theatrical Animal/ Pointing To A New Understanding Of When I Am Not Standing In A Language Problem Principal.”

I miss visiting kari in the morning. I woke up by 10, kari at 6. By the time I’d had my coffee, and made it down the hall to see kari, kari would be excited and well into the middle of something, eager to discuss the process. As an exercise in shaking up language problems, kari showed me how to put a text through an on-line translation engine and translate it to Latin. kari translated that Latin to French and back to English on another translation engine. kari translated this text at a website with a ‘sex talk’ translator, then re-wrote it as a manifesto. kari said: “I let the filters

and multiple dialogues build in the moment, just as one would construct an assemblage.” For kari, illustrating the fact of translation was not the work; generating a new understanding of language led to the creation of new work.

In writing, kari pursued an immersive sculptural space. kari suggested the multiple meanings of words as objects; kari wanted to perform the subject and the object. Before writing, before making books, kari trained and worked as a sculptor. I have only seen slides of this early work: assemblages of tin foil and tree branches painted with day-glo colors to form triangle heads affixed with semiotic symbols. At that time, kari admired the artist Ree Morton. I am looking through a monograph of Ree Morton’s work; I see kari edwards. Morton, a sculptor, often used text. I imagine kari responding to these lines from Morton’s journals:

“THE TABLES are waiting until THEY START GROWING CHAIRS
THE CHAIRS are waiting until THEY START GROWING TABLES”

I imagine kari being excited about Ree Morton’s 1973 piece, *Sister Perpetua’s Lie*, which reacts to Raymond Roussel’s 1910 surreal novel, *Impressions of Africa*. Objects, maps and automatic writing suggest multiple, possible, twisting narratives: tree stump, wooden cage, guillotine...

kari: “...I sort of switched. When I went into transition, I was a visual artist and came out a writer... I consider being a writer, being an artist; it’s just a different form...”

kari and I are poring over a book of photographs of Joseph Beuys’ week-long performance, *Coyote: I like America and America likes me*, from 1974. In this performance, Beuys expresses a great ambivalence about America. Picked up at Kennedy airport by an ambulance, Beuys wrapped in felt blanket, gurney to gallery to cage... Coyote and Beuys—alone together, artist and animal, living in a cage in the gallery.

kari was deeply ambivalent about America and about the world: ‘30 different kinds of bottled water? The ice caps are melting!’

... perhaps/ next time when none of the neural implants caress my/ sofas, when there is no understanding which enters the/ habitual, I can say; “I have had a great impact on cryptic/ numbers and letters. I could be a manufactured device, a/ prosthetic understanding and or service - -I could be a/ life form, or a fireplace.

kari demonstrated. kari shouted. kari screamed over everything. kari authored an autonomous logic: spacious, unapologetic, generative. This was the period of known unknowns. Donald Rumsfeld:

... because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don’t know we don’t know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.

kari searched for known unknown unknowns. I continue to be inspired by kari’s courage. kari was stubborn and aggressive. kari walked to work down Valencia street, hailing book-lovers. For work, kari answered crisis calls at a counseling center. kari walked home from work on Mission Street, enduring jeers... kari wanted me to be able to kill: ‘If someone was about to kill Fran, I would kill them. If someone was about to kill you, I would kill them. If someone was about to kill me and Fran, I would want you to kill them.’

kari freed the self from the self while never abandoning true self, experienced the pain of miscategorization, standing up to colleagues and divorcing from family when necessary. All the time, kari fought to maintain a sense of humor, but kari lived constantly concerned with the

condition of humanity and could be morbid. Yet, right before dying, kari turned to Fran and said: "I want to live."

so, where does one get matches and cigs?

oh, you can get them from cadillac.

where?

over there in the corner beyond the pulsating nebula.

after pushing my way through the crowds, paying crossing fees of a kiss here and a body temperature check there, I made it to what seemed like guppies swimming around and towards this huge body in the background. it was a sea of sweat and cream corn, all attempting to offer services to cadillac. and there in the middle of it all sat this multi-breasted multi-cocked monstrosity being sucked on by an earlier version of evolution. I could see that to join in I would have to jump into this undulating ooze and return to my primeval state, but I just stood there and stared as if seeing kali for the first time on a blind date.

and then cadillac looked at me, smiled, and raised one arm—child... come, sit by me.

just then cadillac pulled a breast out that had obviously been hidden and nodded to a self-conscious nipple.

it's yours my child, come and sit by me, let me feed you.....

Partial transcription of kari edwards speaking about *a day in the life of p*. (Subpress Collective, 2002), on GenderTalk #385, WMBR-FM, 11/11/2002, hosted by Gordene MacKenzie, Alejandro Marcel, Nancy Nangeroni, archived by Naropa University at Internet Archive, HYPERLINK "<http://ia300116.us.archive.org/2/items/gt385/gt385-cbr32.mp3>"

<http://ia300116.us.archive.org/2/items/gt385/gt385-cbr32.mp3>.

See discussion of John Cage in Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At* (Boston: MIT Press, 2007).

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HYPERLINK "<http://antpac.lib.uci.edu/search~S7/aTisdall%2C+Caroline/atisdall+caroline/-3,-1,0,B/browse>" Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys Coyote* (Munchen: Schirmer-Mosel, 1980).

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