

The Monkey & the Wrench

Akron Series in Contemporary Poetics

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The Monkey & the Wrench

Essays into
Contemporary Poetics

Mary Biddinger and John Gallaher, Editors
Nick Sturm, Associate Editor



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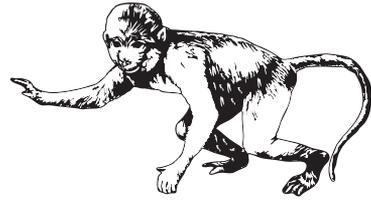
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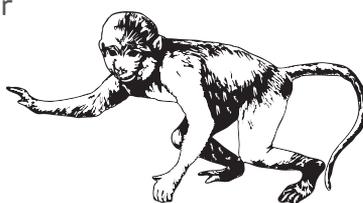


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Introduction

Of Monkeys and Wrenches

Mary Biddinger and John Gallaher



Coming up with a title for this collection caused us great consternation. Monkey see, monkey do. Throw a monkey wrench in the works. Monkey mind. Don't monkey with it. Hundredth monkey effect. Infinite monkey theorem. No more monkeys jumping on the bed. A barrel full of monkeys, etc. And then what happens?

There's a long history of monkey metaphors, as well as wrench metaphors, so as soon as our Associate Editor, Nick Sturm, suggested "The Monkey and the Wrench," we leapt at it. It is a fine way to encapsulate our thinking behind putting this collection together, that there are many ways into contemporary poetry and poetics, and that we wanted to provide a forum for some writers to tinker with it.

We wanted a book that might prove as useful to readers of poetry as it would be to poets, and, as well, as interesting for students as it would be to general readers. We share the feeling about poetry that we're all in this together as readers, writers, critics, students, and teachers. We're all of the above in the face of art. And to deny any of these roles is to deny a fundamental way that art works upon and with us. The essays in this volume, then, are not meant to stake out a territory or to advance

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a singular aesthetic position. Nor do we see this volume as definitive. These are open questions, beginnings or continuances of conversations around and in contemporary poetry, not manifestos or final words. We saw this as our goal.

We chose these authors (with a few exceptions, which we'll get to in a bit) without knowing what they were going to take as the specific subjects of their essays. We wanted to know what they were interested in, to let the contents lead the collection. Eclecticism was our hope, and we've been rewarded. Give enough monkeys a wrench, as the saying goes that we just made up. The wrench—both the way to fix something and the way one might throw it into the works. The monkey—both James Tate's "Teaching the Ape to Write Poems" and Thomas Lux's "Helping the Monkey Cross the River." We're all in this together, helping the monkey along.

If we're doing it right, we inhabit art as a part of the encounter, to paraphrase one of our teachers, Wayne Dodd, who illustrated, through his presence with a text, how it's not reading we're doing, but living into. Texts are experiences, and this is serious stuff, worth taking seriously, which also includes an open field for the antic. *Attend*, is what art calls out to us. What, if anything, art owes us, is another thing. Sometimes in this encounter it's enough to point, and sometimes it's imperative to point out.

Beware monkeys with wrenches. You never know what they'll do. And so what has been done here?

The collection opens with a bit of context. By historically unraveling poetry's relationship with the reading public, Robert Archambeau, in "The Discursive Situation of Poetry," deconstructs the contemporary argument that American poetry is out of touch with its audience, and reconceptualizes the issue in the face of larger and farther-reaching trends. From that moment of history, we move to "The Moves: Common Maneuvers in Contemporary Poetry," where Elisa Gabbert revisits a topic that was popular on the internet last year. Gabbert, along with Mike Young, investigated some of the common compositional practices and ticks of twenty-first century American poetry on the website HTML GIANT. We asked her to work part of it up for this volume, and we were pleased that she sent it to us.

Just as important as the common moves in poetry are the less common ones. Michael Dumanis's essay, "An Aesthetics of Accumulation: On the Contemporary Litany" discusses the popularity of litany in contemporary poetry, highlighting litany's sonic qualities as well as how it establishes a unified framework on which even a poem consisting of fragmentary elements can be built. The investigation of less common moves in contemporary poetry continues as Stephen Burt's "Cornucopia, or, Contemporary American Rhyme" takes up the topic of rhyme. Burt examines the technical and aesthetic principles of rhyme in English over the centuries, and then focuses on its use by contemporary American poets.

Suspicious of the sacredness of what is "original," Benjamin Paloff, in "I Am One of an Infinite Number of Monkeys Named Shakespeare, or; Why I Don't Own this Language," advocates for a continual rethinking and subversive reimagining of meaning and completeness in poetry, arguing that all poetry is a kind of translation, a transformation of thought, a blasphemous and necessary risk. Staying in this realm a moment longer, in "Persona and the Mystical Poem," Elizabeth Robinson explores the mystical poem, defining "mystical" information not necessarily as religious or divine experience, but as that which defies conventional logic. Robinson engages the notion of speaker and persona in this paper, and cites the work of numerous poets, including Jean Grosjean (Keith Waldrop, tran.) and Jack Spicer.

In the next essay, "A Wilderness of Monkeys," the second piece to mention monkeys in the title, and thereby making us feel some sort of monkey title was in order, David Kirby addresses the power of indistinctness, and invokes a variety of art forms and artists, from Shakespeare to Johnny Cash. Kirby argues that a lack of concrete imagery in art is just as, if not more, gripping than continual direct reference to meaning and intention.

At the AWP convention in Denver, we attended a panel titled "Hybrid Aesthetics and its Discontents," which brought several criticisms of the anthology *American Hybrid* together. As *American Hybrid* was both highly praised and highly criticized, and as Cole Swensen, one of the editors, talked about it as a way to start a conversation, we contacted the panel organizer, Michael Theune, about including it in this volume. After

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talking with the other panelists, Arielle Greenberg, Craig Santos Perez, Megan Volpert, and Mark Wallace, Theune sent it to us. Since this was now a fully involved conversation, we thought it would be a good idea to contact Cole Swensen for a response, and she generously replied with her “Response to Hybrid Aesthetics and its Discontents.”

We felt it was fitting for us to have this symposium and response from Cole Swensen in this, our first volume, because it illustrates our vision in putting this collection together, which is that we’re not looking for essays that agree with each other (or with us), but essays that are investigating poetry and the situation of poetry as something important, and with something at stake. We tried to get some of that feeling in the title, by having “Essays into Contemporary Poetics” as our subtitle. That “into” was important to us. It’s not *in*, it’s *into*. Anyway, those were the sorts of things we were thinking about.

In a fitting move, we saved “Goodbye, Goodbye, Goodbye: Notes on the Ends of Poems” by Joy Katz for the end. In it, Katz examines the musical and traditional roots of repetition, while suggesting various alternative poetic closure techniques available to contemporary poets.

Concluding with really concluding, we look forward to the future conversations that these essays will certainly be a part of, as well as what might happen next in this series. The doctor said, as we all know, “No more monkeys jumping on the bed.” But doctors don’t know *everything*.

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This monkey, as they say, has gone to heaven.