

THE SRPR REVIEW ESSAY:
BRIDGING THE DISTANCE:
DOCUMENTATION AND DISAPPEARANCE
IN PERFORMATIC POETRY

BECCA KLAVER

Remember to Wave

Kaia Sand

Tinfoil Press, 2010

88 pages; paperback, \$16.00

SABORAMI

Cecilia Vicuña

ChainLinks, 2011

166 pages; paperback, \$16.00

Nox

Anne Carson

New Directions, 2010

192 pages; cloth, \$35.00

When thinking about performance's relationship to poetry, we often cite ancient history—"the roots of poetry are in performance"—or point out perceived divisions between page and stage in our own time. In both cases, poems printed in books, using visual formal elements such as line breaks and white space, and poems that are performed orally, employing voice and gesture, may appear to have little in common. What gets lost in these too-ready binaries—modern vs. ancient, page vs. stage—is a way of accounting for, and thus appreciating, the many books of innovative contemporary poetry that resist such oppositions, exploring instead (and often transforming) the performative possibilities of the printed page. The interdisciplinary field of performance studies—which for several decades now has been studying performances off stage, or outside traditional theatrical

contexts—can, through its attention to site- and ritual-based acts, help us think about poetry beyond the page.

The idea that poetry has developed myriad relationships to performance that depart from the ancient root model or the page/stage dichotomy is not new, though it is rarely investigated. Perhaps this lack of exploration is due to a too restrictive sense of disciplinary divisions, or perhaps the fuzzy distinction between art forms is simply taken for granted—and therefore left unexplored—as a characteristic of postmodern art. In either case, works that cannot be defined easily as one art form or another tend to fall through the critical cracks. This is true in spite of the fact that hybrid art forms have always existed, and the fact that poets have been actively employing methods and mindsets of postmodern performance in their work for decades. Poet Jerome Rothenberg opens his essay “New Models, New Visions: Some Notes Toward a Poetics of Performance” (1977) by announcing the collapse of traditional artistic categories: “The fact of performance now runs through all our arts, and the arts themselves begin to merge and lose their old distinctions, till it’s apparent that we’re no longer where we were to start with.”¹ Wary of citing these seemingly new avant-garde strategies as evidence of artistic “progress,” Rothenberg instead calls them “continuities,” invoking the sense of performance as a lost root of other art forms: “Eighty years after Dada, a wide range of artists have been making deliberate and increasing use of ritual models for performance, have swept up arts like painting, sculpture, poetry (if those terms still apply) long separated from their origins in performance.”² While admitting that “a likely characteristic of the new paradigm is an overt disdain for paradigms *per se*,” Rothenberg nevertheless goes on to list seven key influences of performance on poetry and other art forms, stressing that generic and formal walls had, by the mid-1970s, already broken down: “There is an unquestionable and far-reaching breakdown of boundaries and genres: between ‘art and life’ (Cage, Kaprow), between various conventionally defined

1. Jerome Rothenberg, “New Models, New Visions: Some Notes Toward a Poetics of Performance” in *Postmodern American Poetry*, ed. Paul Hoover (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 640.

2. Rothenberg, “New Models, New Visions,” 641.

arts (intermedia and performance art, concrete poetry), and between arts and non-arts (*musique concrete*, found art, etc.).”³

In what follows, I consider three new books that engage this interdisciplinary space between poetry and performance: Kaia Sand’s *Remember to Wave* (Tinfish Press, 2010), Cecilia Vicuña’s *SABORAMI* (ChainLinks, 2011), and Anne Carson’s *Nox* (New Directions, 2010). All three books are in large part facsimiles of handmade books that combine visual and discursive materials.

Elements of the books are, in turn, documents of performances, as well as performances themselves. Importantly, each book is not only performative but is also “performatic,” to borrow Diana Taylor’s term designating the embodied, as opposed to merely discursive, “performance.”⁴ Sand and Vicuña both use ritual performances to close temporal and spatial distances that separate them from historical atrocities that they document, thereby demonstrating the performatic possibilities of archival art-making. Against arguments in performance studies that emphasize the value of disappearance and ephemerality, *Remember to Wave* and *SABORAMI* insist on the poetic and performatic possibilities of documentation. While the acts that led to Carson’s *Nox* are not daily, site-based rituals like Sand’s and Vicuña’s, and so perhaps don’t lend themselves as easily to a reading under the rubric of “performatic poetry,” *Nox* performs as an object—an accordion-style handmade book facsimile in a box. It is my hope that concluding with *Nox* will pave the way for further readings of performatic poetry in

3. *Ibid.*

4. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the America* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 6. Taylor suggests the term “performatic,” adapted from the Spanish *performático*, to refer to performance as an embodied act. She prefers “performatic” to “performative” because the latter suggests performance on the level of discourse, as in J.L. Austin’s “performative utterance” or Judith Butler’s “gender performativity,” while “performatic” can “denote the adjectival form of the nondiscursive realm of performance” (6). For Taylor, this is important because “it is vital to signal the performatic, digital, and visual fields as separate from, though always embroiled with, the discursive one so privileged by Western logocentrism. The fact that we don’t have a word to signal that performatic space is a product of the same logocentrism rather than a confirmation that there’s no there there” (6).

books whose relationship to performance is, like *Nox*'s, not obvious at first glance.

The work contained in these books is usually called "poetry," likely because it is made by an artist known primarily as a poet, published by a press known for publishing poetry, or because it uses poetic language to achieve its goals—even though the books are composed of poetry, prose, photography, performance documentation, visual and textual collage, sewing, and other art forms. Sand, Vicuña, and Carson thus blur boundaries between genres, so that "the arts themselves begin to merge and lose their old distinctions" in the ways Rothenberg describes. Such a process is often exciting for the artist, reader, or critic, but the ever-looming threat of this overt hybridity is that it will be experienced only partially, or selectively. If it's difficult to see the forest for the trees, it's just as difficult to see the trees for the forest: the whole becomes more legible as its parts are seen more clearly, and vice versa. By bringing performance theory to bear on these books, I will show how they perform and reenact, make and do and conjure, in ways that are not readily apparent if we limit ourselves to a literary lens.

Poetry-Walks, Documentation, and Disappearance: Kaia Sand's *Remember to Wave*

Kaia Sand's *Remember to Wave* is a paperback book of text (word maps and collage, poems, essays, captions, official documents) and image (visual maps and collage, stitching, photographs, drawings, film stills, ephemera). In trim size, length, and cover design, it resembles many other contemporary books of poetry published by small presses in the U.S.⁵ *Remember to Wave* is divided into two sections, "Remember to Wave: a poetry walk" and "Uptick." The latter is a series of film stills from an amateur movie of scenes of the U.S. Pacific Northwest

5. *Tinfish Press, publisher of Remember to Wave, is known for publishing poetry but explicitly states its bordercrossing mission in aesthetic and political terms: "We publish work from the Pacific region, concentrating on language issues, colonialism, Buddhism, place, and poetic form. Above all, we seek to create alliances between writers whose work crosses national and aesthetic borders." Tinfish Press Home Page. <http://tinfishpress.com/>*