

NORMA COLE'S *WHERE SHADOWS WILL: SELECTED POEMS, 1988-2008*  
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In her *Manifesto* (1969), conceptual artist Agnes Denes addresses meaning making as a paradoxically entropic process by which intentional disintegration pullulates new models of organization:

...that everything has further meaning,  
that order has been created out of chaos,  
but order, when it reaches a certain totality  
must be shattered by new disorder<sup>1</sup>

In short, “new disorder” is a necessary product of occupying space. Denes privileges the coupling or comportment of artist with endemic, critical, microclimate in order to track the effect of thought in space, or put differently, thought's *affect* in space (in response to occupying space). Her interest in the consequence of interface stems from a critical eye to the sometimes glacial movement of entropy complicated by the artist's desire to establish transitory order, even if it's made to be dismantled and built again. Or as she has it in “Study of Distortions” the following year, “Add to [distortions of form] the constant puzzle of having to deal with the discernible aspects or appearances of things, conditions, people, and events—not their ultimate essences or ideal states.”<sup>2</sup> Rather than reduce the complexity of experience to mere phenomenological data, Denes practices *framing* environments, and here I mean systems, landscapes, echo chambers, social and political configurations, the surface of the page—what Denes calls “discernible aspects or appearances of things”—in order to commit to confluence *in flux as flux*.

Reading Denes' intervention next to Norma Cole's auspicious selected poems, *Where Shadows Will*, the inaugural publication of City Lights' “Spotlight Series” (shining “a light on the wealth of innovative American poetry being written today”) is incredibly instructive. *Where Shadows Will* tracks Cole through two decades of careful lyrico-conceptual practice, an omnibus that reveals (more than any of her single publications alone) how poetry might begin to address the concerns of late 70's conceptual art (while obviating the trappings of “conceptual writing” as such). As a visual artist herself (and materialist to boot), Cole sees words as both conceptual *and* visual, so just as “painting is thinking,” *the poem is thinking as painting*, a troubled string of causality further complicated in context:

news flies through the air with a great constriction below  
the throat  
false distance puts the teeth back in  
the singer reads absence backwards  
resting close  
in is by means of a phone in the drawer by the bed  
the painting is thinking the weather goes dry and flat  
this fold carried by air contains no other object<sup>3</sup>

Here the notion that “painting is thinking” is both aesthetic posture and literal fact—the painting *is* thinking in that it thinks “the weather goes dry and flat.” Or in ‘Allegory Fourteen’ from *Moira*, in which Cole writes, “By consideration of our / national stone or anticipation / of our building an idea of it,”<sup>4</sup> we find the building of the idea as well as the poem as building or foundation, idea, and maquette—not the building *in actu* realized as end, but a model of an idea of it. Her poetry rivals the best conceptual architecture as it too exists to address the problem of social and political engagement, despite the possible impossibility of its existence in space. For Cole, however, that the poem *can’t* do all that it promises *and does it anyway* is the conflict of the project writ large. And even with “cement, glass, silicone, polymer” holding together the untenable, like Denes, Cole’s language is built on the presupposition that the idea should stand only to be dismantled and built again. The poem then is a model of manifest thought, each glued and fabricated line fluorescing through the flaw of its impossibility, teetering on the hope of a possible future.

As such, these maquettes serve to track thought as it moves in the critical environment of the white page in order to exhaust its possibility while learning from its struggle. In “He Dreams of Me,” Cole again addresses the project as a whole: “Design problems move. Survival means in each case not to resist movement or where one is in it.”<sup>5</sup> To interface with the poem (to read or to write it) means to accept its labyrinthine logic, its predilection toward excess, so that, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has it, “Poetry is not a catastrophe of catastrophe. But, because it aggravates the catastrophe itself, it is, one might say, its *literalization*.”<sup>6</sup> Cole’s poetry brazenly pulls back the curtain on the present to track where the sheen of “truth” begins to craze, the result of which is a *literalization* of conflict in which the poem attains a kind of surrealist immediacy; which is not to say, however, that the poem depends on oneiric abstraction but that it is

dreamlike not in the sense of  
being vague but  
rather in its clarity and vividness<sup>7</sup>

These poems are neither *about* the catastrophe of static subjectivity *nor* the catastrophe of en-framed objectivity in which reification serves to package and sell experience; instead, they *test* the catastrophe to mobilize the conditions of being for readers to track “where (they are) in it,” a vividness and locked-jaw moxie showing patterns “recognizable, consumable, or renewable.”<sup>8</sup>

This is where I most want to place Cole in the trajectory of environmental art and its concerns. She writes in “Of Human Bodies,” “the water was a bit disturbed when the ring fell in.”<sup>9</sup> Unlike a poet trying to capture being as interpretation-cum-observation, Cole’s poems are *neither the water nor the ring*—they are the confluence of action(s), the waves of disturbance beating against the frame of the page. She writes in “We Address,”

I was born in a city between colored wrappers

I was born in a city the color of steam, between two pillars, between  
pillars and curtains, it was up to me to pull the splinters out of the  
child’s feet

I want to wake up and see you sea green and leaf green, the problem of ripeness. On Monday I wrote it out, grayed out. In that case spirit was terminology

In that case meant all we could do. Very slowly, brighter, difficult and darker. Very bright and slowly. Quietly lions or tigers on a black ground, here the sea is ice, wine is ice

I am in your state now. They compared white with red. So they hung the numbers and colors from upthrusting branches. The problem was light<sup>10</sup>

Lines like waves witness event, literalizing consequence as the embodiment of being-in-the-world-with-others, *not* as stenographer, but rather as *unstable subject* equally implicated and responsible. The result is a poetry vivid and clear *and* dreamlike; in place, resting *and* moving; catastrophe and its literalization; a space to begin to understand a space to begin to understand.

For Cole, “The trip was through the lake and the lake was in the heart”<sup>11</sup>: the trip was through the heart of the lake, read the heart of the subject, read the heart of the problem. “Experience” then echoes Lacoue-Labarthe: as we “understand the word in its strict sense—the Latin *ex-periri*, a crossing through danger”<sup>12</sup>:

the perfect life  
in a series  
of measured gestures  
an invitation to

see the world  
from a bridge  
that burns in  
the next night<sup>13</sup>

To see the world from a provisional position that will have no longer existed, that cannot stand as evidence of existence once it’s piled in ash as the ruin of experience. *Now* we might measure our gestures in careful series, though we know well enough that tomorrow these very gestures will not signify under the weight of our future catastrophe—that gestures themselves will serve (as) their own undoing.

More than most selected poems in recent memory, *Where Shadows Will* serves to make an argument for an aesthetic practice, or at least a way (or ways) of reading. Rather than serve her readers two decades of greatest hits, Cole presents modes of comportment that themselves constellate, reify, and deconstruct before we’ve had the chance to anchor them down. This book makes a persuasive argument for a selection produced by the author herself, if only to unsettle decades of entrenched, habitual engagement.

## NOTES

1. Agnes Denes, *The Human Argument: The Writings of Agnes Denes* (Putnam, CT.: Spring Publications, 2008), 1.
2. *Ibid.*, 9.
3. Norma Cole, *Where Shadows Will: Selected Poems, 1988-2008* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2009), 10.
4. *Ibid.*, 59.
5. *Ibid.*, 65.
6. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 51.
7. Cole, *Where Shadows Will*, 85.
8. *Ibid.*, 78.
9. *Ibid.*, 62.
10. *Ibid.*, 31.
11. *Ibid.*, 64.
12. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, 18.
13. Cole, *Where Shadows Will*, 30.