

Headline

David Fraser

1970

a review of

1) *The Matrix, Poems: 1960–1970*, by N.H. Pritchard, Doubleday paperback, 1970, \$2.45.

2) *Arts in Society*, volume 6, number 3, edited by Edward L. Karmack, University of Wisconsin, 1969, single issue \$2.00, 1 year subscription (3 issues) \$5.50.

Contemporary poetry covers a pretty wide range, far wider than these two examples would have us believe. Good modern poetry is as hard to find as good modern jazz and though these two volumes are approaching it, neither come close enough.

In *The Matrix*, Pritchard deals mainly with Concretism or concrete poetry, a poetry that, for the most part, defies you to read it aloud, i.e. it concerns the eye more than the ear. Charles Olson called it western haiku, it deals with letters more than with words, with words more than with sentences, with visual images more than ideas, etc.

Pritchard doesn't really know how to make it work though, and that's unfortunate considering how little concrete poetry ever sees print, especially on the large established presses that can do it justice. It's strange that a man can start with good ideas, choose to work in a medium that is almost limitless, a medium that has just recently really been discovered, and then really do nothing at all as far as exploring it is concerned.

It's as if he found a door, opened it to find a room so large that he couldn't see to the other side and then never got any further than the doorway.

Most of the poems are "cute," but cuteness can be a fuck of a drag when it lasts for two hundred pages. A few of the poems come off very well but for the most part they are unoriginal and uninteresting.

Many remind me of the work of Aram Saroyan, little one word things (e.g., the word "water" centered perfectly on the page, or the word "noble" done the same way except for slightly larger print). So fucking what?

There are two things I did find very interesting about this book though. One is Doubleday's attempt to keep up with modern literature by publishing this man's book. It states on a slip that comes with any Doubleday book for review that "Special permission is required to quote more than 500 words."

I seriously wonder if anyone at Doubleday has even read this book as it is conceivable that someone could publish this book (or at least half of it) without going over the 500 word limit, call it a review and get away with it legally.

I rather believe that someone assured Doubleday that this book would sell well so they snatched it up and marketed it much as they would any other manuscript (they will probably be surprised to find out that contemporary poetry doesn't sell unless the poet's name is Shithead McKuen, but of course that's not serious or really contemporary poetry.). Fuck them anyway.

The other thing that is interesting about this book even if the poetry isn't very good is that Pritchard is the only black that is writing for himself as a man instead of for himself as a revolutionary as far as I know. You can make up your mind about whether that's a good thing: whether an artist's obligation to himself is more important than any obligation he might have to a movement or revolution. I don't know.

Incidentally, for anyone interested, there are two excellent anthologies of concrete poetry that should be picked up on. The best is the *Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, edited by Emmet Williams and published by Something Else Press, 160 Fifth Ave., NY 10010, \$2.95. The other one, almost as equally a valuable work is *The Chicago Review Anthology of Concretism*, edited by Eugene Wildman, Swallow Press, 1139 S. Wabash Avenue, Chicago, Ill. 60605, \$2.50.

These might not be available in local book stores so I included the addresses for ordering directly from the publishers (I realize it's hard to steal books directly from the publisher by mail & if anybody figures out a way please let me know, but these two books are worth all the money & all the trouble it takes getting them. Go ahead).

Arts in Society is another thing altogether. Being a journal that contains various poetry, graphics, essays, interviews, etc., makes it more open to extremes of good, fair & bad just by its diversity. At first glance the magazine gives the feeling of being well done & consistently good but on further (& closer) reading I realized the magazine consisted of things that vary from excellent to really fucked-up shit.

The form of the magazine itself is very loose & open, the editors seem to know how to use it & the overall effect is one of the best things about it: it makes you feel good. It's hard to find several pages in a row without at least a nicely-done photograph so you never feel bored or fenced in.

There are several well-done collages and collage poems by William Weege & Robert Chute. Also outstanding are two woodcuts (especially the one on the cover) by Raymond Gloeckler.

The subtitle, *The Arts of Activism*, immediately tells you what the subject matter will relate to, but how well is a different question. Graphically it comes off—past that...no. The good shit is mostly in the back but when the reader gets back there he gets tired easily. I got tired & skipped that section.

The section on the S.F. Mime Troupe is very good but not quite long enough. I would have enjoyed reading more written by members of this radical theatre group.

The bulk of the magazine is taken up by poetry, however, & that is where they really flop. Few of the poets included would be considered radical by most of us & that's too bad. Poets like Robert Bly (fuck your impotent politics wherever you are, Bly), Doug Blazek, Kenneth Rexroth, Gerard Malanga, and Senator Eugene McCarthy simply don't belong.

Many of the others are unknown poets, some quite bad & others very good. The two standouts are the Milwaukee Underground Poets (I swear to God that's how it identifies them), James Sorcic & Rich Mangelsdorff, & guess what—one small poem for each of them. The editors would be a lot better off if they had fewer big-name poets & more good poetry.

All in all, it was disappointing, interesting, & somewhat enjoyable. This was just one issue of it. Maybe it's getting better. Maybe worse. Maybe the cops will bust the people who do this mag. Maybe the Revolution will render it obsolete. Maybe it'll stay exactly like it is. Who knows?

I'd like to see their next issue. It's a nice idea.

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