

Guerilla Poet

Attacking the mainstream with strategic verse

HE IS A TALL, SKINNY MAN in a bland shirt. You might smile at him on the bus, nod to him on your way to work, and never think twice about him. You would not suspect him of belonging to an international syndicate. You would never guess that he slips into public places with his chosen weapons in his pockets. Spies and subversives are like that. Invisible. With good covers. He is a pharmaceutical chemist working in Utah. But in the last year, he and his revolutionary brethren worldwide have launched an organization to fight for truth well told, for justice declaimed in plain words, and for the right to free expression in verse.

In 16 months, they have infiltrated bookstores and libraries on four continents with 22,660 free copies of poems, hiding them between covers of other books and then disappearing into the night.

Poetry, say the founders of the Guerilla Poetics Project (GPP), was once a people's art form. It should not take a PhD to understand poetry. But the cultural establishment favors a select few and has turned off the people who need poetry most: "We believe," says the GPP's manifesto, that "art in its finest expression is the pure distillation of what it means to be human and alive, suffering and dancing up to the edge of the grave." The founders object to obscure verse that stymies and puzzles most readers. So they invite readers and writers to join them, to pick poetry together, and to secretly plant the winning broadsides—small cards with poems printed on them—around the world. More than 200 people have become "operatives," detonating verse from Australia to Sweden, Canada to Spain.

This Salt Lake City operative is one of the founders. The *Wasatch Journal* met with him at Salt Lake's Hogle Zoo, a spot

chosen for its anonymity and proximity to the guerilla poet's day job on high-tech Wakara Way.

WJ: *How did you start the GPP, and why?*

Guerilla poet: The nature of poetry is that pretty much the same 20 poets are being published by the same 20 magazines and being read only by each other. It's sad. It's true. It's a really very much insular thing ... We really feel that poetry

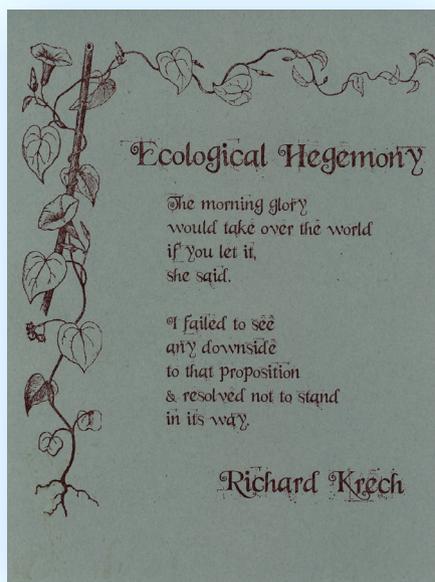
is a medium that's overlooked and very important. It has been for centuries, and I think it still is appropriate now. So we decided that, if we're not going to be published by any of the major magazines and/or book publishers, then we're going to do it ourselves by making little art objects with our poems on them and slipping them for free to customers who buy other books.

WJ: *Could you tell me about your first time as a guerilla poet?*

Poet: I was terrified. Because I didn't know if I would get arrested. We have since consulted some lawyers, and they said they really can't think of anything

that we're doing that's illegal—other than trespassing if that proprietor tells us to leave and we come back.

I have pictures of the first day. I was wearing a T-shirt and a pair of jeans ... where my pockets were large enough that I could stick [the broadsides] in my pocket. We were at the Jordan Landing Barnes & Noble. I walked to the poetry section, and it



The guerilla poet (right) slips a poetry broadside into a book at Ken Sanders Rare Books in Salt Lake City—one of many bookstores he and others around the world have infiltrated.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES RENDEK



A map, continually updated on the Guerilla Poetics Project Website, shows where people have reported finding the hidden poems.

was empty, which wasn't a surprise. So I pretty much had the whole area to myself. I grabbed 10 books, walked to another area where I could sit down, and just stuck 'em.

WJ: *Have you thought about distributing these broadsides in places other than books?*

Poet: We did. We debated what we should do. Should we let them sit in bathrooms and train stations? Should we let them fall out, stick them in a chair, say, at a bus stop? We decided to go more toward a targeted placement, so that we could hit people we really think would really enjoy it, instead of hitting everybody ... We do think poetry is for everybody, but we only have a limited number of resources. We can only print so many of these on a tight budget; we would rather that 99 percent of it doesn't get thrown away.

We've written up a protocol specific to how to place them and what books to place them in. [We target] more modern poetry books versus stuff by Homer ... biographies on any of these poets. Some of the more underground fiction books and nonfiction by Hunter S. Thompson or Jack Kerouac—any of the Beats.

WJ: *Have you had any response?*

Poet: We have had 246, as of today, found and registered broadsides across the world.

On the back, we have a little [note] that basically tells the person who finds it what it is and why we put it there, and then we ask them to register it online on our Website ... They can put in comments, and they can also sign up at that point ... Wherever they're at, they can then hide broadsides themselves, and it becomes almost a pyramid scheme, except for the fact that no one makes any money in this, and it's only to spread poetry to more people, which we feel is a good thing.

WJ: *So, 246 responses in about 16 months. Is that a good ratio?*

Poet: No. It is a low ratio. We explain it by the fact that it's not necessarily the number that are found, because we figure there's this complex algorithm based upon how many are found and how many of those people who find it are interested enough to actually register it. It's impossible to know how many are found. It's impossible to know how many are found by a bookseller or a librarian who throws it away.

WJ: *I notice that there are names on the broadsides. So how is it anonymous?*

Poet: It isn't anonymous. We had toyed around with not publishing the names, but that really defeats the purpose. The purpose is to get our names out there—to get everybody else's names out there as well. We're not trying to hide. We're not trying to say, "This is an anonymous poem from Somewhere Town, USA." We will say it's from us. We even say who the 10 founding members are. You can find us; it's not that hard. But we don't want, in any of our publicity, in any of our interviews ... to act like it was just about us 10. Because really this is about the entire poetry world.

WJ: *How so?*

Poet: The way we look at it is, we think that one person—who maybe didn't know this world existed—can find a broadside and maybe go to look up who this [author] was, and find that that person is connected to four other people, who are then connected to five others, maybe, and they find an interest that they might like, a poet they might like. Because everyone writes so differently. So instead of it being about me, or about the guy in Atlanta or the guy in Sweden or whomever it is, it's about all of us... We wanted to keep out the people who are running it behind the scenes. We don't want our faces everywhere. It's not about us; it's about poetry, and bringing it back to the public, bringing it back to people.

The poetry that we publish in our group, it's all very accessible. We don't use metaphors that are so convoluted that only the writer knows, and we don't use language that is inaccessible. We use common language and we relate to common themes. That's not to say that it's any less intense. It's just able to be read.

WJ: *When did you get your first poem published?*

Poet: It was 1996. And I had been submitting to various independent, underground, small-press magazines, and finally got a

hit. That's actually when I first started calling myself a poet. You know, you never really know if your stuff is any good. If you just think it's good, and your mom tells you it is because she's your mom, you never really know. I finally got a hit, and it was encouraging, and it's just been snowballing ever since, really.

WJ: *What if I want the GPP to publish my poem?*

Poet: If you sign up, you can submit up to three poems per every six months. We vote every six months. We let every [operative] vote. We go through this giant anonymous voting thing. We tally up the scores, and the top 12 win, basically win a broadside. It's really an amazing system. It's fully democratic ... Everybody has a chance. If your poem is good enough, and most of our operatives consider it that, it will get picked and it will get published. It will be hidden in some book and some person might find it; you never know.

WJ: *Can you vote for your own poem?*

Poet: No. You cannot. We have situated it so you have to log in—I don't know how the Web guru does it—but your poems

don't show up on the list, so you cannot vote for yourself. Hopefully people are good enough to not get into collusion so certain poems win, but you know, that happens. That's life.

WJ: *Has your poetry changed through this, as your imagination of your audience has changed?*

Poet: No, not through this. It hasn't affected mine. What affects my poetry more is my age, my wisdom, things I go through in life. I've come to the point where I'm not really seeking fame; I know that's fleeting, and I know it doesn't even exist for a poet. I'm seeking connections with other people, and I'm ready for that. I think all of our poets are ready for that. We're ready to be read, and we're ready to connect with a reader on a more cellular level, on a more organic level. We want them to really love our poetry, and to love other people's poetry, just as much as we do, and we think that they will. WJ

Dorothee Kocks is managing editor and fiction editor of the Wasatch Journal and the author of Dream a Little, a book about myths of the West. Although she spends a lot of time in bookstores, she has yet to discover a hidden broadside.

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