

Cutting Out CONYT, 1977/2017/2024

Letterpress printing on Japanese paper, cut out and collaged on laid paper, with diptychs arranged in quadriptychs read clockwise

Edition 11 of 12 with 1 AP, 1 EC

In 1977, I was 43. After teaching Futurist, Dada, and Surrealist Literature for several semesters, I experienced a familiar female health crisis. There was a lump in my breast that required a biopsy. In my hospital bag, I packed two books by Andre Breton, the leading Surrealist, for distraction: his novel “Nadja” and “Surrealist Manifestos” with automatic writings made by taking dictation from the unconscious and newspaper poems created by cutting and throwing random headlines.

Perhaps it was the fear that had concentrated my mind. But when the biopsy turned out negative and I was home writing a thank you note to my doctor, I suddenly understood what had been bothering me about the Dadas and Surrealists, and what I would have to do.

In the 1910’s, draft dodgers from Northern and Central Europe fled to Switzerland to avoid the craziness of World War I—no one understood why it was being fought and yet it killed more people proportionally than World War II. Young artists gathered in the clubs of Zurich and Basel to protest. Feeling themselves victims of their 19th Century educations and their 19th Century parents who had sworn to them that Europe’s civilization was based on rationalism, they proposed instead a sur-reality (an above-reality) that, by surrendering to the random, would show the true irrationality of European culture.

As a black person born and living in North America at a time when we still learned about ourselves from white media, I felt honesty required that I would have to take the cuttings for my newspaper poems from *The New York Times*, a paper I had been reading most of my life. But as a black woman, I could not afford to submit to the random, I would have to control the random. Unlike the young Dadas and Surrealists, I had been aware of the basic irrationality of Euro-American culture from my earliest childhood. To make the public language private as a way of discovering what I truly thought and felt, I would have to cut consciously and poetically. My goal was to propose a sous-reality (an under-reality) that would be flexible enough to contain and increase comprehension of their world and mine.

Ambitious as I was, though, it wasn’t enough to make the public private. I wanted to achieve strong poems, to create a counter-confessional poetry that would confess from the outside in, paralleling the poetry that confessed from the inside out as in the work of Ann Sexton and Sylvia Plath and other writers of the time.

Cutting Out the New York Times (CONYT), 1977, was a group of 26 newspaper poems made in the last 26 weeks of 1977, averaging 10 panels/pages each. I'd succeeded in making public language private and had produced an accurate representation of who I mostly was during those weeks—a woman in early middle age, fearful of the loss of something she'd always counted on, the power of sexual attraction.

One evening after swimming the usual 47-minute mile in Manhattan Plaza's olympic pool, I was walking my old Raleigh 3-speed toward the highway to begin the 15-mile ride up to 125th Street, then down to the Battery and back, when a nice-looking middle-aged black worker sitting on a stoop called out to me: "Oh, Mama, you've got a whole lot of life left in you yet! A whole lot!" I knew he'd meant it appreciatively, but for me it felt like the end of the world. I turned my bike away from the highway, rode home and went straight to bed.

Still, it wasn't enough just to have made the public language private. I'd also wanted to make strong counter-confessional poetry. But when I read the poems I knew that I had failed. They were too distended and too trapped in elaborate composition rules for cutting and arrangement. I put them in an archival box and forgot about them for 30 years.

When I first put up my website in 2008, I didn't include *CONYT*. I added it later, and then only 5 of the 26 poems that I thought worked "well enough," and let it go at that.

It wasn't until 2017, *CONYT*'s 40th anniversary year, when by fortuitous coincidence the German printer Rene Schmitt said he'd like to do a project with me, that I thought, "If not now, when?" After all, I had 40 years of life and career experience as a critically recognized visual artist to bring to the task.

I'd also read Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* for the fifth time. It had given me an idea that, if applied to *CONYT*, might extract the counter-confessional poetry hidden there. After Virginia Woolf's question addressed to English literature, "What if Shakespeare had been a woman?" I'd been shocked to learn that "Shakespeare" HAD been a woman—in Japan, in about 1000 AD. For centuries before that, Japanese literature had been developing normally, albeit at an unusually high level, with the usual mix of mythology and epic prose, plus romantic poetry emphasizing responses to nature. Then seemingly out of nowhere came Murasaki's *Genji*. . . . Not just the world's first true novel, but a novel that in its length, psychological precision, spiritual awareness, and political astuteness is most often compared to Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

But the world *The Tale of Genji* describes—three generations of a fictional imperial family in Heian Kyoto—was so alien, I could barely understand my first reading of it. By the third reading, the bookshelves were groaning with critical and cultural texts filled with explanations. The fourth reading, however, was smooth and enjoyable. And with the fifth reading, I was back to normal—a former professional translator focused on the delights of the Seidensticker translation. Especially the poems. 800 of them! Some from the Imperial annual anthologies recited from

memory by the characters. Others were written by characters either spontaneously or to fulfill social obligations—it was unthinkable for a man to enter the women’s quarters, bed a woman and not write her a poem the morning after, usually accompanied by flowers.

The poetry of Heian Kyoto was written in the form of *tanka*, the precursor to haiku. Instead of the 17 syllables of the latter, *tanka* were composed in 31 syllables, formatted in 5 lines. Seidensticker had brilliantly translated them into free verse of two lines each. As an artist who’d consistently employed the diptych from the opening moments of my art world career in 1980, I couldn’t help being fascinated by the two-line form.

A few days after Rene Schmitt, the German printer, made his proposal I set to work. I knew I could do it. I’d often joked that I had answers to the diptych most art critics didn’t have questions for. Though I wanted to honor the concept of the original 26-week *CONYT* project, I could only use panels with poetic resonance. Some of the original poems would have several panels that worked, while other poems would have none at all.

In less than two months, 252 panels were reduced to 51. There were 25 diptychs plus 1 single-panel “statement” (which was itself a “collapsed diptych”). None of the panels had changed visually or textually except that now, instead of being newsprint cut-outs on 25-lb rag 11” x 8.5” typing paper, they would be master-printed from letterpress zinc plates on Japanese paper, cut and pasted identically to their originals on 40” x 30” laid. Each panel was a *tanka* that would be drop-mounted beside its “other” in true diptych form. The changes, instead of traducing their originals, were making them more what they were meant to be. *Cutting Out CONYT*, 2017 was becoming the counter-confessional poetry I’d dreamed of. Even calling the pieces Haiku Diptychs after the more familiar form of Japanese poetry simply made them more user friendly.

The only problem was that it was a huge installation and most places where it was shown could only show a small part of it.

Then a few years later, a lucky accident occurred. I was invited to contribute two *Cutting Out CONYT (CO-CONYT)* Haiku Diptychs to a group show—they had no more space to give me. And I’d instinctively thought, “But it would take the same space to hang four diptychs as to hang two (2 above and 2 below).” They agreed.

I could scarcely believe what happened when 4 Haiku Diptychs were hung as a rectangular quadriptych. Their original meanings seemed multiplied by more than 4. The internal meanings of the diptychs remained the same, but now each diptych was interacting with the other three. And their interactions with the whole changed depending on whether they were read clockwise or left-right, left-right. I was learning more about each diptych than I had known before.

When Pavilion 11 at The Glenstone was offered to me for a solo show it was a wonderful opportunity to develop what I understood would be the final stage of the work begun in 1977 with *CONYT*. I was able to create all the remaining quadriptychs and see them hung properly. With all 6.5 quadriptychs interacting at the same time, I feel confident that the effects of each

will multiply indefinitely. I consider *Cutting Out CONYT: The Quadriptychs*, 2024 my most complete piece to date.

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