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## [Guest Post: Kent Johnson on The New Chicago School of Poetry](#)

Robert P. Baird

[Ed. note: **digital emunction** is pleased to welcome Kent Johnson to the wild world of blogging. Herewith, his inaugural post.]

### *The New Chicago School*

My proposal: That the closest thing we presently have to a “School” of younger, rigorously innovative poets in the U.S. (one that stands closest chance of being retrospectively seen as akin in significance to the NY School in its first-generation, proto-formation years—and when I say “School” I mean in that sense of fortuitous constellation, something very different from a self-identified tendency or “movement”) is what I’ll call the New Chicago School. It’s a list of accomplished, experimental writers, more poetically focused as a collective, perhaps, than the contents list of the *City Visible* anthology of a couple years back, and more geographically focused, too, inasmuch as all the poets have roots in the city, even though a few of them have recently moved elsewhere (though in most cases still nearby), and one now lives abroad:

William Fuller, Ed Roberson (these first two the elder figures of the group), Anthony Madrid, John Tipton, Devin Johnston, Peter O’Leary, Robyn Schiff, Bill Allegranza, Dan Beachy-Quick, Michael Robbins, John Beer, Arielle Greenberg, Lisa Fishman, Jesse Seldess, Nick Twemlow, Suzanne Buffam, Srikanth Reddy, Jennifer Scappettone, Francesco Levato, Eric Elshtain, Jennifer Karmin, Leila Wilson, Nathalie Stephens, Joshua Marie Wilkinson, Garin Cyncholl, Joel Felix, Chris Glomski, Erica Bernheim, Larry Sawyer, Patrick Durgin, Joshua Corey out in the suburbs, Tony Trigilio, Daniel Borzutzky (though something of a separate case, the work of these last two, perhaps)... and a gaggle of brilliant scholar-editors associated, past or present, with the Chicago Review, along with Robert Archambeau, on the outskirts of town at Lake Forest.

To these names one could add an active (and often activist) group of even younger poets and publishers: Michael Slosek, Kerri Sonnenberg, Steve Halle, Eric Unger, Luke Daly, Brooks Johnson, and Barrett Gordon, for example (the latter four have close connections, and their work engages the visual arts and music scenes, as well).

For sure, there are others I’m just blanking on, or don’t know, and apologies for that (please add). And obviously (!) there are all kinds of superb poets in Chicago doing important work who don’t quite fit the avant-aesthetic parameters of the grouping—Don Share being one prominent case, or David Trinidad, another.

From a poetic standpoint, what would justify the set? It is a diverse group (as was the original NY School) and a large one, but it's held together by a vibrant, active scene and certain broad affinities of poetic predisposition and—quite often, and with the necessary exceptions—affect. The tilt is towards a “scholarly,” brainy, less “pop-cultural” and more self-consciously “critical” mode than tends to be the case around St. Mark's, for example. And, I'd argue, the work by and large tends to be more thematically ambitious, more novel and challenging in its registers and forms, more earnestly in tune with the international than the work of the younger NY scene, still largely caught, the latter, within tonal frames of the hip, the pop, the vernacular, the anecdotal, the flarf.

I know that some of the poets above—Johnston, O'Leary, Tipton, and Fuller—have already been “aesthetically” grouped together by Stephen Burt (Bobby Baird [has pointed out here](#) that this group represents a rhetorical and formal drift locally known for some time already as “Flood Poetry”), in [his recent essay “The New Thing.”](#) where he also identifies recent theory coming out of the University of Chicago as key source for what he sees as a developing current of poetic epistemology. Burt is referring to “Thing Theory,” as promulgated by, among others, Douglas Mao and Bill Brown, the latter living in Hyde Park, apparently. In short, these younger poets are turning away from the still-fashionable modes of linguistic and conceptual abstraction and towards a rediscovery of “reference” and “concrete, real things,” tending to render their experience with terseness and concision. Though some of the poets he names, it should be noted, are not exactly laconic...

Now, I fully agree with Baird, in [his post here](#) some months back, reporting on aforesaid essay, that Burt is a terrific critic. I suppose Burt and Adam Kirsch are more or less neck and neck right now to be the next Helen Vendler, Burt the horse on the left, Kirsch the one on the right, striding to the pole, pulling their critical sulkies behind. (Though who, one wonders, will be the next Marjorie Perloff?) So there's no question he's very good. But I find his neo-Objectivist “Thing” grouping to be something of a stretch: Johnston, Mark Nowak, Juliana Spahr, Joseph Massey, and Jennifer Moxley, for example, placed in the same stable according to the poets' (very different) renderings of their attentions to objects and their (usually wildly different) thematic application of these phenomenological encounters? Well, OK, I guess, though really, I wonder what U.S. poetry since Williams's isn't haunted at least a little by some manner of Husserlian susurrations inside it. Come to think of it, forget Williams; even spooky Dickinson is chock-full of stuff and Things. So is Whitman, and in overdrive, though he's not quite “concise,” so maybe he wouldn't qualify as a “thing” poet. In any case, what's all that “new” about the New Thing, if such a thing actually exists, is not all that clear.

As you can see, I feel Burt's argument is a bit forced and constraining, a bit too much of a bit and halter, as it were. (Incidentally, interesting to me, and as I wrote Burt after I first saw his essay, I'm pretty sure the first-ever serious application of Thing Theory to post-avant poetry, including quotations from Mao and Brown, et. al, was in Eric Hayot's 2005 PMLA essay, “Araki Yasusada: Author, Object.”) In any case, both Baird and [John Latta](#) have pretty neatly taken Burt apart on all this.

And maybe my grumpiness with Burt's bridling classification isn't all that necessary, anyway. Superior poets will almost never try to conform to this or that critic's taxonomic criteria, and I'm sure someone like Burt would be the last to want them to. The point I'm trying to make, though perhaps I don't even have to, is that you don't need—as again, the New York poets proved, or the Black Mountain poets proved, or the Beats proved, or even the Objectivists proved—any kind of solid critical-philosophical frame to constitute a vigorous “school,” or even tendency, of poetry. You don't even need a quasi one. All you need is a locale(s), smart ambitious people, and a certain affective habitus (often found in taverns) that is friendly, contentious, gossipy, mutually supportive, and professionally incestuous to some degree. The modal, organizing affinities, which rarely funnel down to strong affinities of “program,” grow out of these. If something is right, and who knows what that is or how it works, things flower.

So I'm making the case that there is something that has developed in Chicago over the past few years, an accretion of poetic felicities whose parts and sum are unrivaled by any other avant locale in the country: St. Mark's has a wealth of talent and enough in-house sound for a School, but the textual ambition seems comparatively slight; Austin has Slow Poetry, and this is full of promise, but it's more an embryonic movement, not a School; the Bay Area has a great scene, but the crazy variegation of it all (see Bay Area Poetics) makes any notion of School untenable; Philadelphia is loaded with smarts, but true Schools of poetry cannot abide venerable Headmasters (well, OK, excepting the Sons of Ben, during the reign of Charles I); Iowa City has the most expert practitioners of the period tachisme, but that is not any kind of School, it is a career; Providence has riches, but it takes more than students; Buffalo is home to some fine outlier poets, but SUNY is covered in snow; Boston, apparently, has fallen into the sea.

In conclusion, what I'm proposing (it would appear I am beginning to repeat myself) is something that's

beginning to have a sense of the self-evident to it already, I think, and no doubt others have noticed it, too: that Chicago, right now, is home to the most interesting and vital avant “poetic cluster” in the country.

And I feel confident enough of the claim to name it again, even though I know the name is not all that flashy, but that’s appropriate to the city’s spirit, too: The New Chicago School.

–Kent Johnson  
[One hundred miles from Wrigley Field, in Freeport, Illinois]

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I didn’t realize that Jenny Bouilly is now in Chicago.

Kent

[Sep 8th, 2009](#)

2.  Ray Bianchi

Dear Kent  
Thanks for mentioning our anthology.

Ray Bianchi  
Cracked Slab Books  
<http://www.irasciblepoet.blogspot.com>

[Sep 8th, 2009](#)

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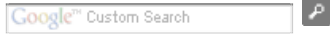
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