

Jennifer Firestone

Dana Teen Lomax

Letters To Poets: Conversations about Poetics, Politics and Community

Letters To Poets developed from an interest in how we could redefine, renegotiate and extend the concept of collaboration. In the *Letters* project, 14 poet-pairs from various regions, races, genders, sexual preferences and aesthetics came together (some never meeting each other except on the page) and wrote letters during approximately a one-year period. Because the participating poets knew these letters would ultimately be submitted for publication, there was a concern that the letters could be imbued with a certain self-consciousness, and to a very limited extent this was true, yet not to the detriment of the project's quality. In fact, even with this pre-knowledge of publication, the letters maintained a sense of spontaneity, even unruliness; there was always an element of falling into a blind space every time a letter was sent out. Throughout the year, as the exchanges continued we took note of the project's success primarily by the shifts and challenges that occurred within the various exchanges. Because there was an actualized "you" always receiving and responding to each letter, one's ideas could never be chiseled in place, controlled and filed away; there was risk and surprise in awaiting each response. The letters range the gamut in what they offer to their receivers: sometimes extremely personal tidbits of a life, sometimes a

disconcerting uneasiness, sometimes silences, sometimes a vociferous retort of anger and, often, generous words of camaraderie.

Though many sent their letters via email, they still carry a level of intimacy inherent in personal epistolary exchanges. There's an introductory "Dear X." There's a salutation at the end, whether it is "Best," "My Best," "Yours," "Truly," "Love," or just a signature. Each of these parts were given thought and fluctuated in style as the exchanges progressed. In choosing the letter form, we were particularly intrigued by the enthusiasm historically exhibited for letters between "famous" poets or from one "famous" or "master" poet to a younger (many times voiceless) "pupil" poet. Though we, ourselves, received a great deal of mentorship from older, established poets, we saw the need to take issue with these endemic hierarchies and create a space in which younger poets of our generation could present their interests and concerns. Although we tentatively labeled poet-pairs as "established" and "emerging," we mostly applied these terms as ways to organize the book, to bring poets in conversation from different generations, versus mirroring a more traditional apprenticeship model. The exchanges resulted in compelling and wide-ranging discussions of topics from race issues to gender codes, and from U.S. politics to poetics.

Letters To Poets is forthcoming from Saturnalia Press in 2008.

The letters you can read in this issue of *How2* are the first exchanges between the following three poet-pairs:

Cecilia Vicuña and Jill Magi

Eileen Myles and Jennifer Firestone

Joan Retallack and Brenda Iijima

Other writers involved in the project are:

Alfred Arteaga and Hajera Ghori

Wanda Coleman and Truong Tran

Jayne Cortez and Rosamond King

Kathleen Fraser and Patrick Pritchett

Victor Hernández Cruz and Brenda Coultas

Paul Hoover and Albert Flynn DeSilver

Eileen Myles and Jennifer Firestone

Joan Retallack and Brenda Iijima

Leslie Scalapino and Judith Goldman

Quincy Troupe and Traci Gourdine

Claire Braz-Valentine and Dana Teen Lomax

Cecilia Vicuña and Jill Magi

Anne Waldman and Karen Weiser

John Yau and Anselm Berrigan

Editors' Bios:

Jennifer Firestone is the author of *from Flashes* (Sona Books, 2006), *snapshot* (Sona Books, 2004), and has a chapbook forthcoming from Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs. She is the Poet in Residence at Eugene Lang (The New School), and her work has recently appeared *Fourteen Hills*, *Can We Have Our Ball Back*, *Dusie*, *moria*, *MIPoesias* and others.

Dana Teen Lomax is the author of *Currency* (Palm Press, 2006) and *Room* (a+bend press, 1999). Her writing has been supported by the California Arts Council, the Academy of American Poets, and the San Francisco Foundation. Currently she is making *Q*, a series of "home movies" about raising a daughter on the grounds of a state prison.