

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

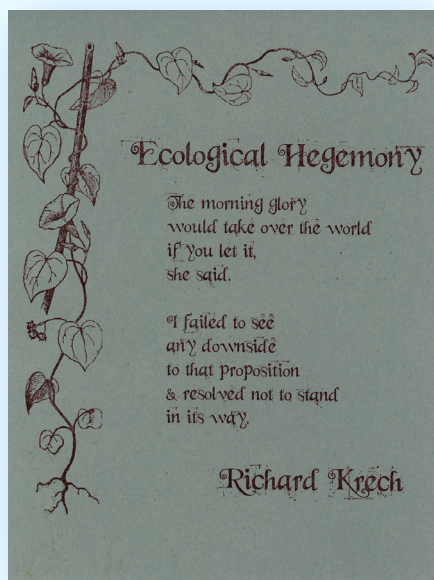
is a medium that's overlooked and very important. It has been for centuries, and I think it still is appropriate now. So we decided that, if we're not going to be published by any of the major magazines and/or book publishers, then we're going to do it ourselves by making little art objects with our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



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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