

currently an imprint of Deep Vellum, so DeWitt has urged her fans to wait to purchase a copy. DeWitt's admirers have celebrated this news as a success for both her financial security and the legions of readers who have yet to discover her work. Yet it's a tempered victory at best—DeWitt's work eventually found a home but required compromise, including negotiating with editors instead of forging a path through self-publishing alone. The comfortable middle ground where she appears to have settled with independent presses, however, has shifted her navigation of publishing, finding an editor/writer relationship that's collaborative rather than oppositional. Her work with *New Directions* and *Dalkey Archive*, both known for publishing lesser-known, avant-garde works by prominent authors, suggests her writing will endure rather than become lost—it will continue to be rediscovered and read with a renewed appreciation by future generations.

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Barbara Guest and Stephen Ratcliffe, *Letters*. Chax Press, 2022.

What happens when one poet emails another? And what makes that question any different from an older one: What happens when one poet writes to another? The questions we ask of Emily Dickinson's now-anthologized envelope poems or Langston Hughes's 1950 Christmas postcards are not all that different from those we ask of poetic composition and communication via laptop: inquiry around textual interfaces, archives, and literary community. Stephen Ratcliffe and Barbara Guest's *Letters*—a series of correspondence between the two poets from November 2003 until Guest's stroke in December 2004—is, above all, a confirmation of the social practice of poetry. *Letters* is also a useful exercise in theorizing the relationship between email and poetic practice in the twenty-first century. It moves us toward defining a poetics of email, or at least invites us to imagine one.

"I am having trouble with your poetry, it is beginning to usurp my page," writes Guest to Ratcliffe in an email on November 22, 2003 (16). The usurpation of the page is one of the benefits of the messages compiled and released by Chax Press in 2022. *Letters* is a slightly oversized square-shaped book, brimming with multiple textual media and forms. When Ratcliffe's daughter sends a catalog of artist Jane Freilicher's New York gallery show to Guest, it can't fit within the bounds of the text in our hands. We take pleasure in a scan of the inner cover's inscription but ultimately must conjure its materiality on our own. "There's no attachment to 'Imagined Room.'" In fact,

I can't receive attachments," replies Guest to Ratcliffe in one email (26). She's speaking in completely material terms—she quite literally cannot receive his email attachment—yet her words take on a philosophical lilt regarding reception and receptivity.

A prominent New York School poet despite her California roots, Guest eventually moved back to Berkeley, where she was based until her death in 2006. Born in Massachusetts, Ratcliffe grew up in Bolinas and San Francisco; he has lived in Bolinas since 1973. Best known for his contributions to Language poetry, Ratcliffe's work ranges from Renaissance scholarship, such as a monograph on *Hamlet*, to his ongoing series of thousand-page books of poems written in a thousand consecutive days. The poetics of Guest and Ratcliffe's correspondence can be read as an advancement, or maybe echo, of what Frank O'Hara called "Personism." Coined in 1959, this doctrine tasks the poet "to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself)." O'Hara derives Personism from the experience of "realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born."[†] *Letters* similarly formulates this one-to-one communication as the basis for poetics.

Letters is made up of letters, emails, and (mentions of) artists' books that don't always make it into the text proper but that we can picture arriving at each poet's home in the post. Ironically, the most analog forms—books and postcards—are often the least accessible to the volume's reader. We must trust they arrived at Guest's home in Berkeley even if we only have a scan. At one point, Ratcliffe attaches a typewritten version of a poem to an email and handwrites at the bottom in parentheses, "(So you can see what it looks like on the page)" (120). Like Dickinson's envelope poems, whose enjambment is shaped by the missives' physical structure, a word processor or email server reifies and delimits poetic form. *Letters* becomes a meditation on what we mean by *analog* within book history and media studies in a twenty-first-century context.

O'Hara's Personism need not be the only term for what Guest and Ratcliffe are doing. *Letters* might be a simpler reminder that the poem is a social object. Ratcliffe and Guest's *Letters* is evidence of what Dirk Van Hulle designates the "ecology" of social and creative practice in his 2022 monograph, *Genetic Criticism*. Inspiration, Van Hulle writes, "is more often than not a result of writers' reading, their interaction with other writers."[‡] Van Hulle makes a convincing argument for the importance of note-taking and

[†]/ Frank O'Hara, "Personism: A Manifesto," *Selected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), xiii–xiv.

[‡]/ Dirk Van Hulle, *Genetic Criticism: Tracing Creativity in Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 76.

ordinary exchange in developing poetic style and sensibility. Writers derive “inspiration” from each other and their environments, rather than interior states. “Here is something from today that makes a note of something you said,” Ratcliffe writes (72). Our reliance on literary community should also provide great relief to writers, for it reminds us that emailing a friend can get one to the task of writing those more ambitious undertakings. Ratcliffe gestures toward the nineteenth century, and the fact that these social practices and communities were always part of poetics, when he notes in a poem from July 3, 2004: “Dorothy / Wordsworth walking ‘part of the way to Stowey with Coleridge’” (98).

This book makes one wonder if all poetics necessitates the usurpation of the page. Seeing emails in a bound book, alongside printed poems, forces a reader to reconsider what appears to be the unquestionably smooth surface of the printed page or the PDF. Throughout Guest and Ratcliffe’s exchanges, both writers return to the question of visibility. “Here’s today’s poem w/ some ‘thoughts’ on the visible/invisible....,” writes Ratcliffe before attaching a typed poem to Guest. Ratcliffe’s poem concludes: “recalling the Talmud / which says ‘if you want to see the invisible, pay close / attention to the visible’” (32). The quotation is not only generative within its original context of the Talmud but also these emails: a textual interface with a visible surface and lots of code underneath.

In the 1970s, the US Postal Service hoped to include email within its services. The USPS wanted the definition of “letter” to include “floppy discs” and “orientations of magnetic particles.”[†] In reading Guest and Ratcliffe’s emails, we recall details about email’s history into the early twenty-first century when their correspondence took place: email was not portable, except for printing it (as Ratcliffe seems to have done in compiling this book). Users could not always swiftly organize emails in their inbox; delete messages with ease; or use an ANSWER command, which we now know as the simple ability to “reply.” Before the ANSWER command existed, users had to type the entire recipient’s address and subject line again as one would address an envelope.[‡] A study of email’s materiality, as in the case of Guest and Ratcliffe’s collected correspondence, necessarily makes us pause on aspects of the seemingly banal medium we take for granted.

If you want to see the invisible, pay close / attention to the visible: Ratcliffe’s words are also an argument for publishing a book like *Letters*, which lends credence to the most “visible,” common uses of language. Guest and Ratcliffe’s *Letters* demonstrate the difficulty in distinguishing

[†] / Esther Milne, *Email and the Everyday: Stories of Disclosure, Trust, and Digital Labor* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2021), 34–35.

[‡] / Milne, *Email and the Everyday*, 27–30.

creative practice from more ordinary and bureaucratic responsibilities. Ratcliffe writes to Guest, “I might include you in my list of references for the Guggenheim I want to apply for” in the same correspondence in which he attaches a poem (118). The relationship between creative and more transactional modes of discourse can be a relief, as it renders writing a less intimidating practice that requires the same skillset used for ordinary tasks in our lives. But it’s also a reminder that all creative practice is shaped by its material conditions. Mirene Arsanios’s “On Artistic Freedom,” where she writes of sending out cover letters one summer as contingent faculty, is an argument against attempts to distinguish “ordinary” responsibilities from poetic practice. No “writing practice” exists outside of her described working conditions as an adjunct.[†] In describing the kind of confessional mode required of the cover-letter form, Arsanios reveals its grating effect on her subjectivity. *Letters* is a poetic contribution to the burgeoning field of media studies and archeology that attempts to ask, as Esther Milne does in her book-length study of email’s role in industry and culture: “How is email experienced, understood, and materially structured as a practice that traverses the domestic and institutional spaces of everyday life? What kinds of stories are told—both *about* email and *through* email?”[‡]

Understanding the distinction between creative and ordinary practice has long been the tacit goal of scholars who work on the sociology and circulation of texts: through archiving and defining writers’ social environments, we can begin to strip away the notion of solitary genius. It’s not so much that this image of the solitary poet is now unfashionable but that a writer is relentlessly shaped by the institutions and subcultures they inhabit, whether through collaboration with friends and colleagues or their working conditions. Many poems throughout *Letters*—eventually anthologized in Guest’s and Ratcliffe’s oeuvres—would not have been brought into being without someone at the other end of a correspondence. Guest’s language, and engagement with Ratcliffe’s language, is the material for his verse. *Letters* is an ode to the interface in the face of a culture that aims to strip away any sign of one, as well as a fulfillment of genetic critics’ calls for “genetic editions,” which show a work in process rather than some arbitrary point of “finalized” publication. Resisting a traditional publication model, *Letters* is an opportunity to consider the poem as defined through its social relations and process rather than publication.

The inability to separate poetic and everyday language mimics Ratcliffe’s poetic practice, which refuses any separation between criticism and poetry. His poetics is relentless in its admission of the world and his instructions

[†]/ Mirene Arsanios, “On Artistic Freedom (Part 1),” *128 Lit*, <https://www.128lit.org/on-artistic-freedom>.

[‡]/ Milne, *Email and the Everyday*, 2, original italics.

for us to do so. Most of Ratcliffe's poems published in *Letters* feature a "woman" who makes identical comments to those made by Guest in her correspondence to him. Ratcliffe's practice—and this theory of poetics—renders the poem less of a closed system and instead a receptacle for the world's chat and mess. As Guest writes to him, "Nothing is missing. I revel in it" (31). Repetition of "noting" (and "thinking," "reading," "telling," "adding," "claiming," "watching," "recalling," and "explaining") occurs throughout Ratcliffe's poems in the volume. His poetics makes one consider that just maybe we, or the woman on the bus, are all performing acts of criticism at every juncture. In one poem, Ratcliffe details not only Guest's "Handbook of Surfing," in her collection *The Blue Stairs*, but also the experience of talking to Guest about it, along with a quote from Paul Bremer on the invasion of Iraq. Ratcliffe's experiences of reading occupy the same plane as bearing witness to a red-tailed hawk and the "white edge of wave breaking to the left" (21). To equivocate between all things, to indicate one's commitment to reading texts and the world alike: that might be the point and best usage of poetics.

Letters provides not only an occasion for critical studies of writers' correspondences but also some practical recommendations for poets. The project tells us that poetic sensibility and style can emerge when we are responsive to friends over email. It also suggests that we might type to each other for the sake of typing to each other, that we can get somewhere simply through casual and regular exchanges of language. Dennis Tenen, writing on the relationship between textual practice and digital interfaces, cites a 1968 report at NASA that discusses writing practice in the early age of computers. "I find that I can express myself better, if I can make all the little changes and experiments with wording and structure as they occur to me," one anonymous typist says of computer technologies. The computer produces an environment, or practice, where one "can experiment, easily take a look and see how a new version strikes me."[†] This kind of touching up is distinct to communication and writing in digital environments.

What remains curious about the ability to easily touch up one's writing and instantaneously communicate is that the latter prohibits the former. Once an email is sent, it is sent. (Despite desperate attempts via software or extensions to "unsubscribe" an email.) *Letters* captures this paradox, with its printed and now-reified emails. There's something oddly analog about the email form, now bound in and called *Letters*. Email's orientation at the crossroads of analog and digital forms—the slowest, most analog form of digital communication, but nevertheless incessant and instantaneous—is perhaps why

[†]/ Douglas Engelbart, "Human Intellect Augmentation Techniques," NASA Contractor Report (January 1969): 50–51, quoted in Dennis Yi Tenen, "Laminate Text: The Strata of Digital Inscription," *Amodern* 7 (December 2017): fig. 7.

it has always seemed on the verge of going out of fashion, or just unworthy of too much discussion. Guest and Ratcliffe's correspondence, however, reminds us that this precise quality is why it occupies a central role in media history and cultural life.[†]

"I feel a nostalgia towards the early days of our correspondence and I'm certain this will not leave me," writes Guest toward the end of *Letters*. "There was the little robin in 'The Brown Vest' and 'blue enters later' in 'The Red Gaze.' I remember your asking, 'what does that mean?' and my saying, 'blue is always late.' How did I ever think of that?" (116). How indeed does one ever think of it? Something comes and goes, so fast, when typing.

This article is dedicated to Jamie Albrecht (1999–2023)

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[†]/ See Milne's discussion of what she calls the "death-of-email narrative," *Email and the Everyday*, 2–4.