

An Imperfect Diamond: The National Pastime Transfigured in Ted Berrigan and Harris Schiff's *Yo-Yo's with Money*

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1. Concepts and Contexts

Like many great works of conceptual literature, the idea at the heart of Ted Berrigan and Harris Schiff's *Yo-Yo's with Money* is an easy one to convey: on September 14, 1977, the two New York School mainstays take various drugs and head to Yankee Stadium, where, tape recorder in tow, they record their own shambolic play-by-play as the local nine take on their bitter rivals, the Boston Red Sox, in a game which would prove pivotal in the late-season pennant race. They later transcribed these tapes and, in 1979, Bernadette Mayer and Lewis Warsh's United Artists published the forty-page mimeographed book in an edition of 500 copies. *Yo-Yo's with Money* does not appear in 2005's *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan*, and like many of Berrigan and Schiff's original publications, remains out of print; however, this singular work is deserving of greater attention—not just for its innovative concept, but also as an imaginative cross-genre work which, more than three decades later, delivers potent laughs and great insights into its authors and setting (Fischer 54). Before we investigate the broader themes underscoring *Yo-Yo's with Money*, however, we must consider the ways in which the tape recorder's presence and the poets' use of transcription as a writing process alters the authorial voice, along with the content and shape of the final text.

Ron Padgett suggests that the techniques used in *Yo-Yo's with Money* might have originated long before the book's composition: in his 1993 remembrance, *Ted: A Personal Memoir of Ted Berrigan*, he recalls the pair walking through New York City in 1961, absorbing fragments of fascinating conversations on the busy streets, prompting Berrigan to proclaim, "We should get a tape recorder and just walk up and down this street all day, and then go home and type it up. It would be unbelievable" (34). While this speaks, primarily, to Berrigan's still-budding love for the cosmopolitan delights of his adopted hometown (where, he would later rhapsodize in "Whitman in Black," "you can turn around 360 degrees/ [a]nd everything is clear from here at the center/ [t]o every point along the circle of horizon"), it also gives us insights into the poet's nascent aesthetics (*Collected Poems* 420-421). For a young artist of such voracious appetites—guided by Dadaist traditions of collaboration, automation and appropriation—the thought of any poetic raw materials slipping through the cracks was unthinkable, and here, too, we see Berrigan's interest in sound and voice taking shape.

Charles Bernstein has famously observed that "Berrigan's work...can most usefully be read not as a document of a life in writing but, inversely, as an

appropriation of a life by writing,” and indeed, the poet constructed some of his most characteristic and best-known poems out of the minutiae of everyday life (things he did every day, opening his daily mail, a list of books on his shelves) (154). Berrigan believed in “put[ting] everything into your poems, what it says in the letters you get, in the books you read, what you see in the street,” and in *Yo-Yo’s with Money* we see this lived poetics taken to a new and logical extreme: the presence of a tape recorder further facilitates his creative processes to the point where he can write without writing (“Propitiate” 109). Simply by taking in a baseball game and recording their conversation, the two poets are capable of creating a new and novel text, and this serves as the perfect embodiment of Bernstein’s conception of Berrigan as a figure whose all-inclusive practice of writing and hedonistic practice of living were so thoroughly integrated that any moment might potentially bear creative fruits.

When the transparent expediency of the tape recorder as compositional tool is wed to the equally expedient (and democratizing) medium of the mimeograph, *Yo-Yo’s with Money* truly becomes a hypermodern text—speedily composed and speedily disseminated. “Bernadette [Mayer] & I had just bought a mimeo machine,” Warsh remembers. “Having the machine in the house made the idea of doing a book & then actually doing it almost the same” (Warsh). In his essay, “Publishing Ted,” he writes, “it was possible to produce a book like *Yo-Yo’s*—type stencils, run them off on the mimeo machine, collate around the kitchen table, staple, mail copies into the world—in a matter of weeks” (17). Moreover, for the two poet-publishers, integral members of the St. Mark’s Poetry Project scene who’d just relocated to Western Massachusetts, their press could facilitate an intimate form of communication with their close friends and other like-minded individuals, capable of bridging tremendous distances (not only of space, but, as we shall see, time as well). “The audience for the book—as it was for all the Angel Hair/United Artists books—were the people in the immediate community. In this way I was able to distribute at least a few hundred copies of every book to all the people I knew were interested,” he recalls (Warsh).

Berrigan and Schiff contribute to this communication as well, sending out greetings—much in the same way real baseball announcers would—to friends, including Warsh, Mayer and the painter George Schneeman, who they knew would eventually read the book (10). During a lull in the action, Berrigan starts discussing the poems he’d typed up that day, at which point Schiff interrupts him “Gimme that microphone we don’t want any more propaganda for your new book Easter Monday everyone will get it soon enough” (20).¹ Finally, in an inspired moment of meta-commentary, which looks forward to the finished text, Schiff even announces, “[b]y the way if anyone is interested in transcribing this tape we’ll be happy to take applications” (18).

¹ Ironically, the poems from Berrigan’s *Easter Sunday* manuscript were scattered throughout several of his later books, and wouldn’t be assembled into a proper collection until 2005’s *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan*.

2. The Poet as Baseball Enthusiast

"We're the worst jackoff jokers I've ever heard," Schiff opines before the first pitch has even been thrown; Berrigan's reply is swift and stern: "This is no joke" (3). Indeed, our "New York School announcers" are no mere amateurs, but rather serious (if unconventional) students of the game, as evidenced by Berrigan's proud proclamation on the book's opening page, that, "[m]y mother brought me up to go to ball games & I'm happy to say that I'm at one tonight" (35, 1). Ron Padgett fondly remembers the poet's admonition, "'Only a dolt would read *Sports Illustrated*, you dolt! You want to read about sports, read *The Sporting News*. Dig the Texas League box scores!'," and it's worth recalling that the second of ten commandments which comprise "The Code of the West" in Berrigan's epic masterpiece, "Tambourine Life," instructs us that "The true test of a man is a bunt" (129). Likewise, in Schiff's late-sixties "Eye Poem," we see the recently-retired Dodgers great Duke Snider evoked as an elegiac figure: "Poor cat/ he does some photo ads/ for Great Day/ 'A man's way to remedy gray' // He was a great ballplayer too" (323).

Certainly, for American youth who came of age in the postwar era (Berrigan was born in 1935, Schiff in 1944), baseball—which was more widely available than ever through radio as well as television—was not only a true national pastime, but also part of the national zeitgeist. "I've always been a baseball fan & there's a long tradition between baseball & poetry," Lewis Warsh writes, citing Joel Oppenheimer, Fielding Dawson, Paul Blackburn, Marianne Moore and Tom Clark as examples. "I still read the sports pages as if it were an endless novel" (Warsh).² Harris Schiff adds Bernadette Mayer (specifically her marvelous ode to the legendary Red Sox backstop, "Carlton Fisk is My Ideal") to that list, along with his friend and mentor, Jack Spicer, who, he recalls, "listened to every San Francisco Giants game on the radio" (Schiff).

Schiff also spells out the loyalties of *Yo-Yo's with Money's* authors: "Ted grew up an avid Red Sox fan (and a big idiot). I was a Yankees fan (and absolutely brilliant) from age 8 or so, when my father took me to Yankee Stadium" (Schiff). He'd return the favor for Berrigan's son, Anselm, who tells *Chicago Postmodern Poetry*, "[m]y dad tried to get me into the Red Sox, but the poet Harris Schiff took me to Yankee Stadium in 1979, and I was smitten. I liked Reggie Jackson, and really liked the fact that they had a guy named Bucky on their team," reveling in the game's heroes, its ephemera, in much the same way that his father and Schiff did. Indeed, while the two poets might fully embody countercultural ethics and aesthetics (given their drug and alcohol intake, their free talk of sex, their use of profanity and even their outward appearance, all evidenced within *Yo-Yo's with Money*), they're also two fans connecting with a part of their cultural heritage.

² Cf. Larry Fagin's group photo of the Best & Company picnic, shot at the Staten Island Ballfield, Easter Sunday 1968, which depicts Berrigan, Warsh and numerous other New York School poets posed with bats and balls, about to play (or having just played) baseball (*Secret Location* 38).

Naturally, the stadium setting, along with the tape recorder's presence, sets up an easy analogue to traditional baseball play-by-play, and this is a role which both Berrigan and Schiff eagerly perform, even going so far as to assume faux-sportscaster identities complete with American everyman names—Berrigan becomes "Tony," while Schiff is "Joe" (who, "Tony" chides, "didn't really hit all that well in the world series in 1946")—and a gentle antagonism, due to their rival affinities (3, 2).³ From the book's opening lines, the two capably mimic this voice, from its most grandiose and lyrical mythologizing to its corniest repartee:

H: The monolithic Bronx county courthouse looms out of the depths of the night as the mickey mouse organist plays some vaguely tangoesque warm-up music for the Boston Beantown players to hit fungoes to about 7:22 on a September 13 Boston playing the Yankees in a crucial game for the Red Sox who are totally caving in in the heat of the 1977 pennant race

T: What are you on, Harris?

H: I'm on the edge of my seat. *Ted* (1)⁴

While Berrigan and Schiff's idiosyncratic delivery and outrageous asides are the true punctive delight here, the game itself, its dramas and excitements, also plays a central role within the narrative, and as such, the two teams are unofficially acknowledged as co-authors of a sort by a secondary title page reading, "New York Yankees vs. Boston Red Sox // Yankee Stadium September 14, 1977." Both men make a genuine effort to keep their focus primarily on the game unfolding before them, amidst inventories of chemicals consumed, accounts of fights in the stands, appraisals of the women surrounding them in the nosebleed section and the aforementioned shout-outs to friends "listening" in their imagined radio audience. Even when Berrigan seemingly abandons the concept a quarter of the way through the text, saying "[w]e're going to switch you now to our intermittent broadcasting booth whereupon you'll only hear intermittent comments about the game by two of the announcers that we have specially trained for that purpose," he quickly relents since, as Schiff acknowledges, "[a]ctually the play-by-play is totally fascinating & the intermittent announcers don't seem to be able to stay away from it" (9).

³ This friendly antagonism seems to have been a characteristic of the poets' friendship. Schiff's memorial poem, "Stretching Out in a Regal Bath," for example, begins with the lines, "you gave me a backache to remember you by / lugging your stupid suitcases half a block / when I could've gotten a cab // Stubborn / that's what you are" (103).

⁴ In this introduction, we also see a second mimesis, as Schiff emulates Berrigan's emulation of Frank O'Hara's "time-stamp" motif, most famously seen in "The Day Lady Died" (O'Hara) and "Personal Poem #9" (Berrigan). Of course, sociable borrowings of this sort are a trademark of the New York School poets. It's also worth noting that Schiff gets the date wrong here—the announcer's fallibility (or perceived lack thereof), is one of the conventions the poets will seek to undermine as the text progresses.

Note, however, that for Schiff it's not the game that is so "totally fascinating" but rather the play-by-play itself. For these two poets, both intensely interested in sound and language, the opportunity to indulge in a ventriloquistic appropriation of the announcer's role, subverting it all the while, seems particularly enthralling. Poetic exploration and exploitation of voice is central to Berrigan's poetics—from his inspired sampling of the likes of Shakespeare, Rimbaud, Ashbery and O'Hara (along with his contemporaries, Ron Padgett, Joe Brainard and Dick Gallup) in *The Sonnets*, through to late works such as "Little American Poetry Festival," "Kerouac (continued)" and "Avec la Mécanique sous les Palmes," which are constructed completely from borrowed lines and/or voices from the likes of Pierre Reverdy, Lorenzo Thomas, Joanne Kyger, Anne Waldman and a *The New York Times* article on the late Beat bard (705).

Here, it's the mannerisms and parlance of the Yankees broadcasters, and in particular, the venerable Phil Rizzuto, that serves as the poets' muse (though Howard Cosell, Jimmy the Greek and Mel Allen all get mentioned as well), even as they deconstruct their conventions. When, for example, Schiff indulges in one of the announcer's trademark catchphrases, "I must say & this uh panorama of this giant Yankee Stadium all lit up is Onbullievabull," Berrigan responds with a curt "[d]on't gimme this Phil Rizzuto bullshit" (1). However, it's impossible for the two to perform their roles without acknowledging the legend's influence: mulling base running strategy, Berrigan notes "as Phil Rizzuto would say let's see if the runner on first is going with the three & two count" and several times throughout the text, Schiff empathetically states "I'm beginning to understand Phil Rizzuto a lot more" (20, 9).⁵ However, what he comprehends is that "it's ridiculous how this fucking baseball formula talk just flows right out of your vocal chords" (7).

While such a feat is no easy task, given that the sport is celebrated for its arcane and idiosyncratic diction, it would be difficult to distinguish between the two poets and professional sportscasters. Listen, for example, as Berrigan rattles off stats and gives historical context with great ease: "Freddy Lynn who although he is only batting .251 three years ago was simultaneously the rookie of the year & the most valuable player & this year has 16 homeruns & 68 runs batted in" (20). Likewise, Schiff is capable of mustering lyric excitement when necessary: "Jim Rice the designated hitter, the greatest hitter in the American League hits a long drive!! Jackson gets a BAD JUMP ON IT IT DROPS IN he plays it off the wall JACKSON BOBBLES IT IT goes through his legs Rice around second" (9). Authenticity and invisibility are the keys to their appropriation here; when, for example, Berrigan borrows from John Ashbery in *The Sonnets*—e.g. "How Much Longer Shall I Be Able To Inhabit The Divine" from "Sonnet II" (which subverts the title of Ashbery's "How Much Longer Shall I Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher...")—he's paying tribute to an influence, but also subtly changing the pilfered line, through its recontextualization, and in the process, he takes ownership of it (29).

⁵ An ironic sidenote: in 1993 the broadcaster indirectly returned the favor with the publication of *O Holy Cow!: the Selected Verse of Phil Rizzuto*, a collection of on-air calls transcribed by editors Tom Peyer and Hart Seeley and passed off as found poetry.

Within *Yo-Yo's with Money*, this process serves two purposes. First, it establishes their credibility—their real knowledge and love of the game—which is important given how incongruous these two avant-garde poets seem in the midst of the bleachers and the larger general culture of baseball.⁶ Lewis Warsh concurs, relishing “the idea of these [two] stoned poets in the often red-neck conservative atmosphere of the ballpark” (Warsh). Even if they might not fit in, they most definitely know their stuff, and that’s consistently demonstrated throughout the book, which consists of much more serious baseball talk than one might initially expect, especially in the pivotal final pages.⁷ Moreover, once their legitimacy is established, they have free-license to take as many liberties as they’d like—with the game itself, with their performance as “broadcasters,” and even with their own coherence—and, as we shall see, they’ll go to great lengths to do exactly that.

3. A Wild Shout from the Bleacher Seats

Lewis Warsh succinctly summarizes *Yo-Yo's with Money's* authorial dynamic as “Harris playing the straight man pushing Ted over the top,” and though this understates Schiff’s own outrageous contributions to the text, it correctly locates the most pleasurable aspect: the poets’ persistent deconstruction of the experience of the game playing out before them—from the conventions of the baseball announcer roles they’ve appropriated, to the stadium experience itself and their place within it (Warsh). The first, and most subtle way in which they do this is through slight exaggerations of standard baseball play-by-play, starting with distortions of some of the sport’s most cherished aphorisms. Consider, for example, this exchange, which punningly dismantles the cliché, “baseball is a game of inches”:

H: This game definitely is a game of feet.

T: Yeah & Figueroa had his fucking feet in the right place

H: You know that was quite a feet him pitching out of that inning

T: Yeah it hurt my feat. (21)

Likewise, when Schiff refers to Figueroa as “a nervy sonofabitch,” Berrigan replies, “nervy is evidently a synonym for stupid in your book” (20).

⁶ We’ve already worked towards debunking some of these misconceptions, however Berrigan and Schiff’s affinity for the sport is not so clear to an uninformed reader (if such a thing exists, considering that the small audience for this rare and esoteric text is likely to be very familiar with the New York School and its aesthetics).

⁷ So dedicated are they to their duties as announcers, that Schiff actually gives the final line scores after Reggie Jackson’s game-winning two-run homer: “Yankees two runs six hits no errors Red Sox no runs six hits & one phony hit & no errors” (39).

The two also engage in a long debate—which verges on parody—of baseball semantics, beginning in the top of the fifth inning, when Schiff observes Red Sox shortstop Rick Burleson squaring off to lay down a sacrifice bunt. Berrigan accuses him of “believ[ing] in jargon which he doesn’t really know what there’s any equivalent for in the King’s English”; adding, “[w]hat the fuck is ‘square’s off?’” Schiff’s long-winded response—“Squares off is when you hunch your shoulders out so that the arms present something vaguely representative of a parallelogram which is too hard to say so I mean you can’t say parallelograms off so you say squares off which is more easily uh extrapolated by the tongue”—prompts an even more long-winded response from Berrigan, who argues that what Schiff really means is “squares around,” conceding, “he could also be described as squared off...but in fact he has to square around in order to be squared off” (18).

While, no doubt, this exchange is partially driven by the poets’ own good-naturedly contentious relationship, it also speaks to baseball’s infinite potential for disagreement, from team loyalties (Berrigan and Schiff’s favored teams, the Red Sox and Yankees, have perhaps the sport’s most legendary rivalry) to statistics, rules (free-agency and the designated hitter rule, both recent inventions at the time, were both controversial topics), eras, and even the delightfully thorny “intangibles.” Moreover, when the phrase in question becomes a gleeful refrain for the two (people are called “fucking squareoffs,” and are warned that the poets will “square [them] off fully”), it foreshadows the sonic experimentation we’ll discuss in greater depth later in this essay (18).

Berrigan and Schiff so conscientiously perform their roles that we don’t just get play-by-play, but also other ancillary ballpark data, all of which is taken to hyperreal extremes. Scanning the stadium landscape for billboards, Berrigan constructs a spirited collage of brand names, products and promises, in much the same way as he might assemble a poem: “French’s pure prepared mustard & Marlboro cigarettes go together very well & should you make a meal of those you should put on some Brut get out some Manufacturer’s Hanover auto insurance put in some hi octane low price J Paul Getty gas & uh take a drive out to Yankee Stadium & give us a ride home.” On cue, color man Schiff chimes in with a cordial piece of advice, “& remember if you’re getting it on with your sweetheart tonight & things aren’t quite right lubricate with French’s pure prepared mustard” (31-32). This riffing on the Yankees’ advertisers also serves to critique the increasing commercialization of baseball—both over the airwaves and within the stadium itself—and, as we shall see, it’s possible to read the poets’ witness in *Yo-Yo’s with Money* as an oblique, yet effective, social commentary.

Berrigan’s absurd litany parallels an earlier one, in which Schiff and “[t]he Yankees welcome Prudential Insurance Company Newark New Jersey Policemen’s Wives Association Middleston New Jersey Huntington County Adult Education Association & assorted jackoffs from Stamford Connecticut” among many other groups “responsible for this ruckas [sic] you hear in the background”—dutifully recording another authentic yet unnecessary ballpark detail (17). Likewise, when Berrigan gives the out of town scores, announcing that Baltimore has widened their lead over the Blue Jays by four in the top of the eighth, he confesses that it’s “the most irrelevant useless bit of information I ever

fucking heard" (and not just because Toronto would come back with four runs in the bottom of the inning) (8). As the book progresses, their drug-amplified attentiveness results in further obscure and useless bits of data: for example, "[a] piece of paper blows across the field" or "George Scott just scratched his balls" (8). Another long Berrigan interlude concerns the differences in the spacings between numbers in each team's line score on the display, though, he concludes, "the significance of this is not evident at this moment" (17).

By introducing and reveling in this element of fallibility, the poets further debase the monolithic broadcaster persona by undermining one of its key characteristics: its certain authority. Throughout *Yo-Yo's with Money*, Berrigan and Schiff miss important details, make mistakes and openly admit their faults as announcers. For example, the two are so engrossed by the "square off" debate that they lose track of the action on the field. When one of the Red Sox manages to get on base, Berrigan quickly shouts, "Uh oh whoever that was just hit" (18). Later in the game, he announces, "Now at bat the inimitable number five for the Red Sox...." "Denny Doyle," Schiff chimes in and is rebuffed, "[i]t is not Denny Doyle it's some pinch hitter." When the "pinch hitter" grounds out to Willie Randolph, Berrigan concedes, "[t]hat pinch hitter for Denny Doyle incidentally folks was Denny Doyle" (36).

No doubt, errors like these are likely aided by their prodigious intake of drugs and alcohol, and throughout the game, we're treated to not only their take on the happenings on the field, but also a self-reflexive tally of the various intoxicants the two have consumed. At one point, Schiff apologizes, "If you notice a little uh lackadaisicality in my play by play it's because I can't find my fucking pills." Seconds later, he says of Berrigan, "Due to slight inconveniences our announcer has been replaced as soon as he reorients himself with the next rush of chemicals we'll have him back cause he is the only wit in the house" (17). This nicely complements Berrigan's estimation of Schiff: "all those various kinds of drugs that he's taken have no doubt put him in such a position that anything he says tonight will be completely illogical relatively useless & totally inaccurate however it may have some saving wit" (1).

The drugs and beer seem immeasurably useful in helping two poets enjoy what, by Schiff's admission, is "a boring fucking game," such that Berrigan's second pill starting to take effect is "the most exciting thing that's happened thus far" (19, 8). However, they also fuel our own enjoyment as their play-by-play becomes more and more hilariously disjointed, loaded with numerous surrealistic inventions. When, for example, Schiff notices "a large contingent of Chinese fans sitting along the third base line rooting heavily for Reggie Cleveland," Berrigan has a quick and easy explanation: "[t]hat's because Cleveland had the guts to take sides in the Opium Tong Wards of 1879" (12). Among other sundry fabrications, we hear about "Billy Martin's secret autofellatio exercise," and that "Chris Chambliss' mother is a full-blown Narragansett Indian" (2, 12). Furthermore, Butch Hobson earned his nickname because he "has long hair & likes to make it with women," while Thurman Munson's name "in Polish means Wooden-head" (though, Schiff chimes in, "in English it means Money") (22, 27).

From there, it devolves into even more adventurous sonic experimentation, such as Berrigan's impression of "seventy-five wheelchair bound spastics

from Bellvue hospital” cheering on Yankees manager Billy Martin: “uh uguh ooohuh ugey buhy maih you boo goo gi ruji bobba goo ruggy hit rey wooba gooba” (18). The more enjoyable exchanges, however, are the ones that still retain some semblance of standard play-by-play, no matter how dazzlingly disjointed they might get—echoing back to Berrigan and Schiff’s “straight” performances:

- T: Ball four & Scott is now not first
- H: Scott fouls one back he’s still alive as they say but he’ll still be alive after he strikes out on this next pitch
- T: It would be nice if he were a little bit more alive & hit the damn ball somewhere
- H: The umpire wants to see what kind of vaseline Figueroa’s loading up the football with
- T: I’m thinking of joining the airforce
- H: & Mel Allen is thinking about having another drink
- T: Jack is bringing up the hotdogs for the guy nextdoor to me
- H: & Scott takes a strike for ball four [...] (11)

Indeed, the presence of the tape recorder facilitates a number of *Yo-Yo’s with Money’s* most unique characteristics. First, in addition to the obvious fact that it captures Berrigan and Schiff’s voices, providing the book’s raw materials, it also captures the sounds around them—including stadium announcements, the roar of the crowd, snippets of conversation with other fans, as well as music and other noises, all of which are typographically rendered as parenthetical asides—making the text a three-dimensional space, with which the poets can enter into dialogue. Moreover, by taking full advantage of the simultaneity afforded by this space, they are able to create impressively layered syntactical collages:

- H: Right one of the fucking Yankees popped up I believe it was second baseman Willie Randolph who did what was expected of him in that situation
- T: He hit the ball out to the same place where he usually runs over to catch it
- H: He seems to like that area
- T: Yeah
- H: he may have been reading the teachings of Don Juan

T: Right, that's right
 he found his spot, exactly
 H: Bernie Carbo
 T: too bad it
 H: throws a frisbee
 T: wasn't on a porch
 H: back into the bleachers
 T: in goddamn Guatemala. (22)

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the knowledge that their words are being recorded spurs Berrigan and Schiff to an even greater performativity. "FUCK ALL I seem to have come to this fucking game with a poet," Berrigan states at one point, however, he's certainly up to a little friendly competition as both strive, with the help of their various pills, to make more hilarious, more outrageous and more lyric statements as the game progresses—after all, as Schiff observes, "a war of words is the best kind of war" (11, 26). Of course, the fact that "[t]here's eh lovely girls watching us because we're doing this tape recorder business" doesn't hurt, either (27).

4. A Record of the Time, and of the Time Passed

While *Yo-Yo's with Money* easily succeeds as high-concept comedy, providing readers with a parodic take on the national pastime as well as a candid and intimate glimpse into the larger-than-life personae of its authors, it also—through the inadvertent totalizing effect of the recording medium, which captures all, indiscriminately—serves as witness to the greater social setting of the times, and the vast differences between then and now. In this way, it functions much like Barthes' conception of photography in *Camera Lucida*: "The photograph does not call up the past.... The effect it produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what I see has indeed existed"; that is, any comfort it might provide is tempered by harsh reminders of our own mutability and the absences afflicted upon us (82). The most obvious absence is Berrigan himself, who would be gone less than five years later, succumbing, at last, to cirrhosis after years of drug and alcohol abuse. Here, we see him in the fleeting calm before the storm, gleefully stoned and having fun with a close friend, not long after the initial case of hepatitis, which would eventually lead to his final illness. "It's one for the time capsule," Lewis Warsh writes about *Yo-Yo's with Money*, "Yankee Stadium is closing, Ted no longer here," and more than thirty years later, we mark numerous other losses—from the players and coaches who are simply distant memories and names in the record books, some gone, like Berrigan, while still in their prime (Warsh).⁸

⁸ Most notable among these is Yankees All-Star catcher Thurman Munson—the previous season's Most Valuable Player, and 1970 Rookie of the Year—who'd die in a plane crash the same year *Yo-Yo's with Money* was published. R&B superstar Marvin Gaye, cut down at the age of 44 seven years later, also makes a cameo when, in the bottom of the

Conversely, through the inadvertent “time capsule effect” of the recording process, *Yo-Yo’s with Money* also permanently preserves what is typically an ephemeral experience: the minutiae of the game itself. While we might remember stunning plays, great at-bats and the game’s final outcome, we mercifully allow ourselves to forget the sometimes-wearying flow of the game, occasionally punctuated by these brief excitements. Even in a wired age, our media-mediated memories are reduced to these highlight reel sound bites, these Web Gems. In *Yo-Yo’s with Money*, however, the slow, scoreless game serves as the ground-level tedium alleviated by Berrigan and Schiff’s banter.⁹

Moreover, through the frame of the poets’ observations, we receive an oblique, but authentic document of life in New York City during one of its most tumultuous periods, as it slowly recovered from the brink of bankruptcy (memorialized by the infamous *New York Daily News* headline, “Ford to City: Drop Dead”). As Sam Roberts succinctly puts it, “In the summer of 1977, New York lost its mind.” Among other daily trials faced by its citizens, Roberts cites bombings by Puerto Rican nationalists in Manhattan workplaces and department stores, sweltering temperatures which reached as high as 104 degrees, the July 13-14 Con Ed blackout and subsequent looting, arson and riots, which saw more than 3,000 arrests, as well as “a psychopathic serial killer armed with a .44-caliber revolver and dubbed Son of Sam [who] held New York hostage” (Roberts).¹⁰

Long-time residents of the Lower East Side, one of the city’s poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods, both Berrigan and Schiff were well-acquainted with the city’s perils. Despite Berrigan’s assertion that, “Yea, though I walk/ through the Valley of/ the Shadow of Death, I/ Shall fear no evil—/ for I am a lot more/ insane than/ This Valley,” his life in this “urban inferno” had not been an easy one (568, 420). A decade earlier, Lewis Mac Adams remembers, “Ted... got beat up by a gang of kids in Tompkins Square Park and broke his leg” (216).¹¹ Ron Padgett remarks that for Berrigan, this attack evoked “the same crushing fear...he had felt as a boy coming home from school: the fear of being beaten up, and the subsequent fear of being thought a coward” (37). He also recalls an incident from late in the poet’s life when a typewriter case containing Berrigan’s massive collection of poetry recordings was stolen from his St. Mark’s Place apartment while he and his wife, poet Alice Notley, were sleeping—“My heart curls up every time I imagine the thief dumping all those cassettes in a trash

seventh, he’s welcomed by a message on the scoreboard. “I think it’s rather rude of Marvin to have arrived so late as the seventh inning,” Berrigan notes (32).

⁹ I’ll address both boredom, and the mediated experience of the game later in this essay.

¹⁰ The book includes Berrigan’s lampoon of a Con Ed message broadcast on the scoreboard: “in case you are unaware of the fact over fifty thousand underprivileged youngsters this season cared enough to pay their Con Ed bill uh the Yankees therefore say thank you to Con Ed for taking their money.” Memories of the blackout still fresh in their minds, “the audience responds with a healthy fuck you to Con Ed” (32-33).

¹¹ Cf. Allen Ginsberg’s 1974 poem, “Mugging,” which sympathetically details the poet’s robbery at the hands of a street gang, not far from his Lower East Side apartment, demonstrating how drastically his “honking neighborhood...my home ten years” had changed from the 60s to the 70s (625).

basket somewhere" (58).¹² Schiff had also been touched by similar violence in the New Mexico wilderness, as related in his classic 1978 Angel Hair book, *I Should Run For Cover, But I'm Right Here* (which is dedicated to Berrigan).

Within *Yo-Yo's with Money*, we see repeated references to violence and social decay—within the city and even within the stadium itself. Berrigan relates a story about an earlier visit to the Bronx with the poet Jim Carroll (who is significantly younger than either Berrigan or Schiff, and a former all-star basketball player to boot), during which they were harassed by "some tough guys"; a situation that, thankfully, they were able to escape without trouble (29). They're not so lucky at the game itself, where a number of fights break out in the bleachers—"over the length of the baseball season which one man claims is far too long," Schiff jokes (24). Commenting on one late scuffle, Berrigan notes, "[t]he fans here at the game tonight have uh mixed their chemicals & their uh alcohol a little unwisely"; Schiff replies, "[t]hat doesn't include us though cause over the years we have gotten wise to the mixing of these things." Berrigan gets the last word, noting, "we can't fight for shit," which underscores how out of place they are amidst the culture of the upper deck, and earlier in the game, he almost gets into a fight with a surly fan in their section (26). Though the tape misses the conflict itself, the poet catches listeners up as part of his play-by-play:

the horrifying drunk next to me who was looking to fight somebody besides me seems to have split while the two guys standing right next to me on the right partially blocking my view also have split I told them that they were all wonderful fellows & that I didn't really mind what the hell they did as long as they didn't stay in Harris's seat so that was that. (15)

The tension evoked by this intrusion of violence into what should ostensibly be safe territory finds expression in grim comments such as Schiff's observation that "[s]everal police wearing batting helmets appear to be looking for dead bodies in section eleven" (24). Throughout the text, "law and order"—as embodied by the umpires, "security police rent-a-cops & assorted yo-yo's," all clad in blue—looms over the proceedings, and their panoptic presence is that much more troubling for its ineffectiveness: calls are blown, fights still break out and the poets are free to commit "a horrible criminal offense against the state," popping pills in the nosebleed seats (22, 17).

Moreover, the poets make explicit connections between the troubles inside the stadium and those outside. Schiff, for example—continuing the tradition of a hyper-aware sense of surroundings we see in "Eye Poem"—chastises Berrigan for "failing to notice anything about the beautiful reflections of the sun as it was hovering lower & lower in the western skies & bouncing off the empty loft buildings now disintegrating into unfortunate decay," during their walk down to the subway earlier that evening (29). It's also Schiff who notes that "if you look carefully at the tenement buildings overlooking the bleachers you can see all

¹² Obviously, for myself—as both an audio archivist, and a fan of Berrigan's work—the irreparable loss of these recordings is a tragedy on par with Hemingway's lost Paris manuscripts.

kinds of amazing people hanging over the edge watching the game," and later on, makes the Whitmanic pronouncement, "I see glittering before me the towers of the Washington Bridge and various housing projects in Harlem" (2, 27).

These various inclusions are all conscious decisions on the poets' part, attempts to not only authentically capture the ballpark experience, but to provide testimony of broader social concerns which affected their daily lives (both were well-acquainted with what Allen Ginsberg so aptly termed "poverty and tatters"), along with the lives of their friends and the city's impoverished masses—so that in a remote future, this tempestuous period of New York's history might not so easily be sanitized (126). City politics shape the text once more when a group of supporters of Mario Cuomo's mayoral campaign run across the field waving signs, prompting a discussion of Ed Koch and the recent primary—Koch would go on to win the election, largely on the strengths of a "law and order" platform which appealed to citizens still shaken by the blackout and subsequent riots (23).

The pall of violence subtly shading the joys of *Yo-Yo's with Money* also extends to the recently-ended conflict in Vietnam. In *The Angel Hair Anthology*, Schiff shares memories of his early years in New York, calling the war "an omnipresent nightmare during those years." "I was sick at heart," he continues, "frightened by the war and the hideous culture that supported it" (599). Here, more than two years after the fall of Saigon, the war is still on his mind when he remembers, "goin to baseball games & not standing up durin the Star Spangled Banner" (3). Berrigan is quick with a satirical response: "Well I'm glad to hear that you supported us while I was in Vietnam getting my ass shot off by the fucking gooks & picking up incidentally a \$500 a day heroin habit which I still can't support" (3). Within his sarcasm we still see a sensitivity to the issues facing veterans, which is notable given the scant support among the American populace (and, one might assume, the Yankees Stadium bleachers) for those just returned from Southeast Asia.

Returning to the heart of *Yo-Yo's with Money*, we also see evidence of baseball's own evolution over the course of time, specifically the ways in which the fan's experience of the game has changed. Schiff, born and raised in the Bronx, misses "the mighty Polo Grounds" (home to, at various times, the New York Giants, Yankees and Mets), and marks the ways in which Yankee Stadium itself (which reopened in 1976 after a massive renovation project) is different from the "old Yankee Stadium" of his youth: "I have a long tradition of coming to this stadium.... I did like it better when the battleship green posts that held up the upper decks would obtrude into the vision of all the fans & you could see the spitstains & ancient mustard stains that Babe Ruth's admirers left" (27; Clem 34). Looking around at a large number of empty seats, he observes that "there's nobody over 25 in the ballpark," and assumes that the Depression-era fans who used to fill the stands "would rather stay home & watch the game on color TV" (8). Though television has changed the way the home viewers take in the game, the stadium is also a victim of technological infiltration—thanks to the electronic scoreboard and instant-replay display (the first in all of baseball), the way the

fans experience the game is changing as well (Clem).¹³ Schiff, for example, notices "some maniac watching the game on a tiny portable TV set some three rows below us" at one point and later on, typographical notations indicate a "radio audible in the distance" (8, 15).

For a small and restless crowd—used to the hyperreal delights of professional commentators, multiple camera angles, fast edits and conveniently timed commercial (and hence, bathroom) breaks—a real baseball game seems less than thrilling, and this lack of enthusiasm can have obvious detrimental effects on the players and the pace of the game. In the top of the fourth inning of this scoreless contest, which had only seen five scattered hits between both teams, Schiff laments the lack of action:

H: But this is the kind of boring fucking ballgame that we were hoping to avoid maybe somebody will start hitting

T: & furthermore this ain't boring! It's only boring because of you fucking assholes at home watching it on TV

H: It must be doubly boring if you're sitting in your living room
George Schneeman has probably painted four frescoes by now

T: & besides if you're sitting in your living room without us there it must be TERRibly boring. (16)

The answer, for Berrigan—as borne out in *Yo-Yo's with Money*—is for fans to return to a direct and personal experience of the game, relishing its various sensory delights, and if that's not possible, then the next best thing is vicariously partaking in *their* direct and personal experience of the game, even if one does so through a secondary agent, the text itself. Consequently, we can see how the burgeoning prevalence of a technologically mediated experience of baseball doesn't just alter the fans' experience of the game, but also shapes the conception and composition of *Yo-Yo's with Money*—after all, the book doesn't take the form of a poem, or of first-person reportage (cf. Bernadette Mayer and Anne Waldman's *The Basketball Article*, published by Waldman and Warsh's Angel Hair Books in 1975), but rather it becomes a compromised artifact of that mediation: a transcript of their own personal broadcast. As such, this textual version is as much an incomplete relic of the original recording as it is an embodiment of the game itself.

Had PennSound existed in the late 70s, or if Giorno Poetry Systems had the capital to issue a multi-album set, one wonders whether Berrigan and Schiff's book might've been released in audio form instead. "There were no options like PennSound in those days—no computers—so anything other than print was out of the question," Warsh laments. "If we had had the means for fancier production we could have included a cassette with each copy—that would have been

¹³ Of course, Berrigan and Schiff's tape recorder is yet another sort of technological intrusion and it too alters their experience of the game, as we've already discussed.

exhilarating but it was never in the cards" (Warsh). Of course, the potential exists that the recording might still see the light of day—a very exciting prospect indeed, as it would bring us even closer to the direct aural experience the text clearly seeks to emulate.¹⁴

5. Postscript: from *Yo-Yo's with Money* to *Sports*

Published in July 2008, Kenneth Goldsmith's *Sports* serves as a fitting continuation of the work begun by Berrigan and Schiff three decades earlier: both books are irreverent, concept-driven texts centered around the broadcast of a Red Sox/ Yankees game which rely heavily on the reader's understanding of the personae of their authors. However, *Sports*—the final installment of Goldsmith's "on the ones" trilogy (which also includes *The Weather* [2005] and *Traffic* [2007])—approaches its subject matter in a very different, and equally novel fashion, transcribing, word-for-word, the Yankees' radio broadcast to produce a 119-page piece of "uncreative writing." "This is a *very* boring book," the author notes in a 2008 interview with Kareem Estefans, "because it's said that in a typical baseball game...eight minutes of action happens." However, Goldsmith's book documents the longest nine-inning game in the history of the game. "What happens? How do they possibly fill the time for five hours?" he wonders; "It's absolutely painful" (Ceptuetics).

While this question of how to fill the time from the first pitch to the final out is a common concern in both texts, the end results couldn't be more different. Goldsmith's work foregrounds the concept itself, and while he valorizes the aesthetic endurance necessary to see an idea through to its completion, even he doesn't expect his audience to read his books from cover to cover—instead he provides a "wrapper," a brief explanation of the work's guiding principles and processes, and understanding this alone is more than sufficient (Ceptuetics). Within *Yo-Yo's with Money*, baseball itself functions in a similar fashion. Harris Schiff notes "what a slow game baseball is"; as a result, "those who don't inimically understand it have trouble understanding it or understanding why people would bother to waste their time watching it" (a charge that some might levy against conceptual art of all sorts) (19). In Goldsmith's work, the necessary understanding (often) absolves one from experiencing the work itself, but for Berrigan and Schiff, that understanding impels us towards a richer appreciation of the text's tiniest details—the concept is important, in that it sets the stage for nine innings of banter between Berrigan and Schiff, however the banter itself proves to be far more interesting.

Lewis Warsh agrees that *Yo-Yo's with Money* "is meant to be read, totally," and takes great pleasure in its immediacy and its personality: "I think the book gets better & better as time passes.... [It] reminds me of how witty they both

¹⁴ In our correspondence, Harris Schiff also mentioned the existence of "a totally unknown, partially transcribed tape made by me and Ted at Fenway Park in 1978"—a sequel, of sorts, to *Yo-Yo's with Money*—which, no doubt would be of tremendous interest to fans and scholars of both poets.

were, Ted especially" (Warsh). Comparably, Goldsmith's recorded renditions of the first two "on the ones" books, *Traffic* and *The Weather* are particularly enjoyable—perhaps for the slightly-sentimental reason that those performances get closer to the warm, auratic charm which is resoundingly evident in *Yo-Yo's with Money*. Indeed, it's a rare work that manages to so successfully combine concept and character, serving as a vivid reminder of not only its creators, but also the times in which they worked. Hopefully, we'll soon see the fulfillment of Lewis Warsh's hope that "someone should reprint it," so that a wider audience might be able to appreciate its ramshackle brilliance, and laugh a hell of a lot in the process.

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