

Both Vincent Katz and Carter Ratcliff have recently published new books: Katz's *Swimming Home* (Nightboat) in May, and Ratcliff's *Tequila Mockingbird* (Barrytown/Station Hill Press) in June. The two interviewed one another for the *Rail* on the subjects of poetry, novels, the audience, and the point of writing in the first place.

Vincent Katz with Carter Ratcliff

CARTER RATCLIFF (RAIL): I'd like to begin by asking you a question about a passage in "Sidewalk Poem," the final poem in your recent book of poems, *Swimming Home*. In that poem, you write:

Could be a time for poetry,
but outside, not in
not on the inside looking out but rather
on the outside on the outside looking,
sensing the air, rain, drops, sidewalk [...]

This is striking against the backdrop of all the poetry from the late 18th century onward that makes a point of presenting itself as an emanation from deep inside the poet's soul or sensibility or whatever—which implies that poetry is somehow apart from the world and quite possibility superior to it. To be "on the outside looking" puts you in the thick of things, a part of things, and I wonder if you would like to say something about that.

VINCENT KATZ: I want my poetry to be impacted by things external to myself. I don't want to be in control of the poem. I want the poem to be a vehicle for experiencing the world—in particular, other people and the contingency of things appearing and disappearing in my environment. I get a buzz from being on the street, and it's my favorite place to write. I've approached the task in different ways: sometimes returning to the same block or neighborhood over several days or weeks to compose a poem, sometimes registering specific external stimuli paratactically, sometimes, as in the poem you quote from, "Sidewalk Poem," by attempting to construct a more generalized, or abstracted, field from the experience of being on the street (this is helped by the compositional technique of composing by phrase, rather than by traditional syntax), and in even more experimental poems, by waiting for several minutes and trying to compress everything I see during that time into one word, then another.

I feel a commonality with Frank O'Hara's practice of composing poems in the middle of cocktail parties, just going up to the typewriter and typing a few lines. Or typing poems at the Olivetti showroom on his lunch break. The idea that the ideal place to write poetry is subject to the chaos and incident of daily life, if you are open enough to it. My favorite line of his is "I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally regret life." What do the subway and a record store have in common? People, and contingency. Another benchmark for me is James Schuyler's poem "February" with its lines, "I can't get over / how it all works in together / like a woman who just came to her window / and stands there filling it / jogging her baby in her arms [...]" Well, he was inside technically, but his vision was outside. I've been influenced too by the social

freedom of the Beats, the Warhol scene, poets like Ted Berrigan, John Wieners, and the cross-fertilization of artists in Wallace Berman's *Semina* circle. Part of that has to do with the ability to circulate. I was amazed to find that Robert Creeley, a poet I love, had a diametrically opposed method of composition. He would leave a social gathering to go up to his room to write a poem when inspiration struck.

RAIL: What in your immediate family background pointed you toward a poet's life?

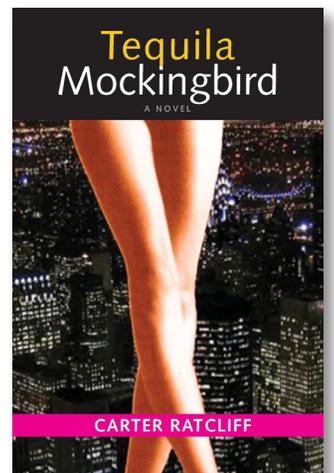
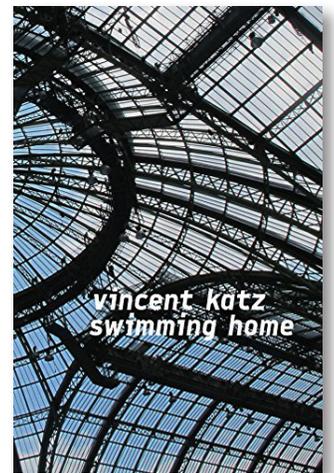
KATZ: I grew up around poets and painters. Everyone I knew was one or the other, with the occasional critic or curator or dancer thrown in. I remember Joe Brainard being around a lot, and Kenward Elmslie, as well as Ron and Pattie Padgett. I had an autograph book, and I got autographs from people like John Giorno and Ted Berrigan. Ted wrote, "To Vincent Katz, from New York Fats." Then he did this wild, abstract drawing in ball point pen. And below, he signed it, "Your friend, Ted Berrigan." Years later, I remember participating in one of my first New Year's Day marathon readings for the Poetry Project, being really nervous, and after I read a poem about Edwin Denby, hearing Ted from the back of the room, intoning, "Right on, Vinny." I've shied away from the word "community," but now I have to recognize that as powerful evidence of community, and a collective culture. I spent a lot of time as well with Rudy Burckhardt and Edwin. Poetry was always around. It was around our house, and it was around the houses of people we visited. As a kid, I'd be left to myself, so I'd check out the bookshelf, and there I'd find these amazing publications from presses like *Adventures in Poetry*, *Big Sky*, *Angel Hair*, *Kulchur*, together with *New Directions* and *City Lights* books, and whatever else people were interested in. There was no hierarchy or separation of poetry from everyday life. On the contrary, it was seamlessly integrated into it. Those books, particularly the ones published by people in the local community, were like talismans. They were beautifully designed, and they stood out among more pedestrian efforts, attracting the eye and leading it in to the book's interior, where poetry of equal quality lay waiting to be enjoyed. From what I could see, being a poet was as natural and as exciting as anything else, and a big part of it was the collaborative element. Poetry was a pleasurable social activity that resulted in enduring works of art.

RAIL: Focusing on your work, there is the formal range you mentioned, from paratactic sequences to fully formed sentences, and I'm wondering if the choice of which form to use in a particular poem has to do with its subject matter. Or is it more a matter of what you feel about the subject matter on a particular occasion or series of occasions? In short, why one form or another?

KATZ: One of the things I am always aware of in poetry is its visual aspect. I feel I can get a sense of someone's poetry at first glance, almost like one's first

impression of a painting. When you walk into a room and see a painting, whether you want to or not, your mind takes a snapshot and registers an impression. I love that moment, and I feel something very similar with poetry. You can glance at a page of poetry and get an impression right away as to your assessment of it. It does have to do with the words (as with the colors, application, in a work of art) but it also has to do with their array on the page. In my books, I am very conscious of how poems look on the page. I was fortunate, in *Swimming Home*, to work with an excellent editor, Lindsey Boldt, and a fantastic designer, Margaret Tedesco, who understood implicitly what I was going for and were able to implement it. So form is partially how a poem looks on the page, how it presents itself to the reader, and I like to present a variety of forms. That is something I inherited from poets like Virgil and Horace, who prided themselves on mastering several forms, an ability exemplified in our own age by a poet like Kenneth Koch.

In terms of why a certain form for a certain poem, part of it is intuitive. A poem like "What Vincent Saw on 30th Street" develops its own sense of informality that ultimately makes sense, using variable line lengths and sudden stanza-like outcroppings. The continual shift in form represents the tumultuous situation the poem is attempting to communicate. In other poems, I am aware of how the first line that comes into my head dictates the form for the poem. That is, a line will come to me, and it has a certain rhythm and length, certain feet, though I don't bother to parse them out. Succeeding lines must cohere with that first line, though they don't need to be identical formally. Sometimes, I will get a "vision" of a poem. I want it to be in a certain "style." One style that recurs as an inspiration to me is a kind of poem that Ron Padgett, Dick Gallup, and Michael Brownstein were writing in the 1960s that is hard to describe. It is abstract but also somehow everyday. The title and the poem have a particular relationship, which is non-specific. A poem of mine like "Goodbye" might fall into that category. I also have a love of stanzaic form, and poems like "The Sea" and "The Garden by the Sea" make use of the limitation stanza provides. I never like to leave a line hanging in a stanzaic poem. The paratactic poems—"Square"



for instance—arise partially out of a desire to keep writing the on-the-street poem, but to take it in a different direction, have it project a different impulse. So, in the many series of poems I’ve written on the street (mainly New York City but elsewhere as well), I have tried to vary my approach to the city. Sometimes, I will favor a more traditional French approach, remembering Blaise Cendrars and making use of collage and literal bits and pieces, colors, signs, sounds, clothing. In “Square,” I developed a technique of staying in one spot (in this case Madison Square Park), observing the scene for several minutes and then trying to have all that struck me coalesce into a single word, then repeating that process for the next word. So, even though the structure is non-syntactic, there is still connection, hopefully, via concrete, specific, occurrences—observed people, nature, animals, time of day, etc.—that engenders a complete experience. And then there is the form I chose for that poem—four-word lines, four-line stanzas—that puts those words into a physical, almost sportive, interaction with one another. In the larger-scale poems—“Swimming Home,” “Barge,” “The Dive”—I was interested in trying to write over a longer period of time. They also were collaborations with artists. “Swimming Home” started out as musings I would write on scraps of paper after going swimming at the gym, which is why it has a more prose-like quality. “The Dive” was conceived as a collaboration with Alex Katz and was written with that goal in mind; its poems follow more of a cohesive formal pattern. “The Barge” was from the start a collaboration with Jim Dine; it ended up as one of the fifty-two books produced over one year in his *Hot Dream (52 Books)* box set. The formal variety of that poem was intended to mirror some of the active formal and informal qualities in Dine’s work.

RAIL: From image to image, line to line, it often feels that the poem is a transaction between you and the external world of places, things, and of course people but, for the most part, people at a distance from you—people you see. However, there are moments when people you do know, people close to you, make an appearance, sometimes obliquely, and the reader gets a sense of what might be called your personal world. Could you talk about that?

KATZ: This is an important question, I believe, at this moment in poetry. That is, both parts of your question are, and they are related. The part about one’s personal life is a perennial issue. In our era, it’s been affected by a number of things. For poets of our ilk, the main influence, I would say, has been Frank O’Hara’s poetry and his short mock-manifesto that really *is* a manifesto, “Personism,” which turns out to be surprisingly durable. “While I was writing [a poem for a someone I was in love with],” he wrote, “I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born.” However, in describing “Personism” in more detail, he adds, “[...] one of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person [...] thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love’s life-giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet’s feelings towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person.” So it’s a complicated balance: the person and the art form. The poem of direct address has seen a huge surge since O’Hara. And then, in the 1990s, there was an influx of performance art into poetry, which meant the inclusion of personal subject matter almost without a filter. I had to keep moving away from the personal. It was a little sad, almost as in your terrific poem, “Arrivederci, Modernismo”—you have to say goodbye to your major influences, but that is good, as you look around you and try to define for yourself what feels most contemporary. You want to access that in some way, while still drawing from sources that may go back hundreds or even thousands of years. So, for me, that has meant withdrawing the

overtly personal from some of my work. You are right about the idea of “distance” in my poems, that is, the distance is constantly being calibrated. That is how we all operate on the streets of a city like New York. We are allowed to look, we are allowed to talk, we are allowed to approach. There is permission in a modern metropolis, and that must be what continually draws us to it—permission and the possibility of anonymity. Even the super-famous can partake of that. John Lennon, when asked why he chose to live in New York, said, “Because people don’t bug you!” He could go to his favorite café and be just another New Yorker. New York is all about distance and proximity, and in my poems I attempt to enact a mimesis of that experience. Then there is the actual personal experience I want to get at. One way is to dedicate a poem. So I have a poem dedicated to Vivien in the book (“The Tree”). The poem does not address her; it addresses a situation I know she would appreciate. She wasn’t there, I was. So I wrote the poem in that distanced-proximate way, sitting on a bench in Madison Square Park, just letting the scene unfold, and then I dedicated it to her.

RAIL: And there is something more, something beyond your personal world and the visible world of the city that also appears in your poetry: the larger world that is beyond our perceptions, no matter how wide-ranging. How do you address that larger world?

KATZ: Again, this is a question of permission. New York gives me permission to perform myself however I want on a given day. Poets have given me permission to put whatever I want inside a poem—anything that is exciting me, anything that is bugging me, anything I just observe without emotion. O’Hara’s poetry was all about permission. Then there is Allen Ginsberg. His avidity for knowledge and for having poetry act in the contemporary realm, in addition to the political backgrounds of his parents, made it inevitable that politics would enter his poetry in a volatile way. In his case, you wouldn’t say the times influenced him as much as he and his friends influenced the times. Then many others—Ted Berrigan, Anne Waldman, but also Language poets like Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews—made it clear that poetry is an arena into which one’s deeply held beliefs have a way of infiltrating. So I’ve always felt enabled to just let it rip, basically. I’ve done it in different ways. During the “W” years, I—like many others, I think—felt powerless in a way I hadn’t felt before. I wanted to react to that, so when Bush nominated John Roberts to the Supreme Court, I embarked on an atypical project for me: I would read the articles every day, and in real time I would grab phrases, the emotional, color phrases, and recombine, edit, them into a long text, which eventually became the poem “Judge.” Part of it had to do with the time frame—I started the day he was nominated and ended the day he was confirmed. Knowing that result was inevitable was part of the impetus to react in this way, through poetry. It felt strangely empowering to be doing something, in some way providing a critique of the *New York Times* reportage. I felt something very subtle and sinister was happening inside the language of reporting, and I wanted to tease that out. Another aspect of that project was that it felt necessary to have a partner in crime, so I reached out to the artist Wayne Gonzales, who had been doing work based on aerial views of the Pentagon taken from the internet. The way Gonzales was filtering his images felt similar to how I was filtering language from the media, so I proposed we work together. He agreed, and that made the process much more exciting. It really felt like we were combining forces to counteract the repressive culture around us, and if we could get that document out into the world, it might have an effect. It was published as a book by Charta with a full-scale design onslaught by Wayne and me. The publisher gave us carte blanche with the design, which helped the aesthetic of both the poem and the visual work; the book ended up intimately integrated and flagrant. The question of effect does not really come up, though. If you question that—how much effect can a poem really have?—you won’t do anything. You’ve got to go on impulse, and get it out there. It has to

feel necessary. It is never simple to find the correct mode in which to respond.

RAIL: And what about the public world we hear about on the news—the world of politics and war, which appears, for example, in “Barge”? How do you make the connection—or the leap—between the worlds of your experience and the world at a geo-political scale?

KATZ: A lot of it involves, again, the question of distance, as one is affected, often, by events that are taking place in other parts of the country, or other parts of the globe. The sections in “Barge” that you referred to involve a similar situation—one reads or hears something in the media, and one responds to it. So, on one level, one is responding to the media, as much as to the situation. Another section in “Barge” might be more subtle. It is section VII (“There is no other way / You must walk across the bridge and take a right”). “Barge,” as I mentioned, was conceived as a collaboration with Jim Dine, so, when I was writing it, I always had Jim in mind as a primary reader or responder, and strains in the poem might reflect conversations we had had, many of which centered on politics. This poem within a poem (section VII) is about the villa on the Wannsee, where, in January, 1942, the Nazis held the Wannsee Conference and established the policy of the Final Solution for “The Jewish Problem.” Both Jim and I had a specific relation to this villa in that we had both been invited, at different times, to the American Academy in Berlin, which is also on the Wannsee, a short distance away. Jim could not bring himself to be there, because of the proximity to that place and what it signified. You do feel in certain places that the ground is tainted. I do feel that the “ground” of this poem contains these ideas and communications buried within it (one couplet is “You know only ice and the birds in trees / And the house that plans for you across the lake”) and something about the language would intimate that, but perhaps the reader would connect it to a completely different situation in their experience that might partake of similar emotions and responses.

RAIL: You mention the reader and his or her way of understanding a poem, of making connections, which might be very different from your own. How do you think of the audience while you’re writing? Or do you? And how you see the audience for poetry now?

KATZ: I don’t necessarily think of an audience when writing poetry, but I am aware of how my poetry is acting in relation to other poetry before and beside it, so I would say that in some senses, I am aware of an audience of other poetries. If I am writing a poem with a specific person in mind, as happens with collaborations, commissioned poems, or poems I would like to dedicate to someone, then that person is certainly the first part of a potential audience. I have been thinking about ancient Greek poetry, how their poetry was always performed, and I do believe that poetry is, in its essence, a performative art. As such, an audience is required. Poetry is valuable as an art of communication. It doesn’t really matter if it is communicating to two people or to two hundred or two thousand. The important thing is that it communicate. So sometimes, I am writing for a specific person, as in a set of poems I wrote recently for, and after, the poet Tom Clark. Other times, I am writing in order to set down a certain experience of a specific day. Then I am not thinking of an audience *per se*; I am simply trying my best to put the experience into language, given the temporal and physical constraints.

I feel that there is a very rich audience for poetry right now. Many books and chapbooks are being published, readings are given and well attended in cities and in educational institutions around the country. The web has proven to be a fertile ground for poetry. Unlike visual art, music, or dance, poetry does not suffer by being presented online. In fact, poetry is even more resistant to screen-fatigue than is prose. Poetry is a sound singing in the ear that persists. Its vitality is reflected by the fierce devotion of its audience.

Carter Ratcliff with Vincent Katz

VINCENT KATZ (RAIL): What was your childhood like in terms of writing? Were your parents avid readers? Did they introduce you to literature they liked? What about school, high school? Were there any particular teachers that had an influence?

CARTER RATCLIFF: My parents read a great deal, especially my mother. She read novels, for the most part, Evelyn Waugh, Aldous Huxley, Henry Green, and Graham Greene too, Ivy Compton-Burnett, and others, mostly English, though she was not an Anglophile. She thought the English were oppressed by their class system and, as a consequence, fussy about the wrong things. But she admired the prose styles of Waugh and the others. My father was a fan of Ernest Hemingway and professed a deep love for the poetry of T. S. Eliot, though I think the latter was an enthusiasm from his school days. I never saw him reading poetry, or my mother either. But they argued about it, my mother insisting that Eliot went into a steep decline the moment his poetry turned religious and my father adamantly disagreeing.

I read all the time as a kid, A. A. Milne, all the Hardy Boys books I could lay my hands on and even one of my sister's Nancy Drew stories, many Oz books, *The Wind in the Willows*, the entire Compton's Encyclopedia for Children, and more, including Lewis Carroll. It was indiscriminate, though I do remember what may have been my first critical judgment, which was that *Through the Looking Glass* is better than *Alice in Wonderland*. I wrote very little when I was in grade school and even less when I got to high school. My reading fell off then, too, for reasons I have never fathomed. In high school, however, I did read Hemingway and Poe. Bad influences, you might say, but, on the other hand, indispensable.

RAIL: Did you major in English in college? Did you envision yourself becoming a writer at that time? If so, what kind of writing did you envision doing?

RATCLIFF: At the University of Chicago, I was an English major. Quite the ordeal. I've never gotten over my first-year experience of sitting in a small room at a round table with five or six other students and being quizzed by a full professor about Yeats's *Leda and the Swan*. Yeats, Milton, Auden, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and the Romantics, Richard Hooker and the milling crowd of 16th-century English prose writers 18th-century English novelists; the Greek tragedians; Emerson and company; Joseph Conrad, Ford Maddox Ford; on and on, and always T. S. Eliot, who was not only taught in minute detail but also invoked on every possible pretext. Shakespeare was Shakespeare but Eliot was "Mr. Eliot." He was accorded such reverence in the Chicago English Department that it began to rub me the wrong way, despite my feeling—as strong now as it was then—that, for all his undeniable flaws, he is very important.

Eliot and literature were treated with nonstop solemnity at Chicago, by faculty and students alike. They were smitten by what I came to feel was a far too deferential idea of "greatness." In reaction, I somehow found my way to certain overlooked English poets of the late 19th century—Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, and other militantly exquisite members of the Rhymers' Club. They led me to the wonderful images of Aubrey Beardsley, and I even read his writings in all their arch and utterly deliberate inconsequentiality. From Beardsley I meandered on to Ronald Firbank and Oscar Wilde, both of whom are still important to me. As is Aristotle, who presided over the idea of literature at Chicago even more insistently than "Mr. Eliot" did. From Aristotle I got a take on form. And on genre. Without that, I never would have become a writer. As it happened, I didn't become a writer until five or six years after I left college, though I always knew that's what I was going to be.

RAIL: You have been that identifiable species of writer all your life: the poet-critic. What made you want to write a

novel? Were there any writers of fiction on your mind as you contemplated embarking on *Tequila Mockingbird*?

RATCLIFF: Many of my poems are in voices other than my own. I've written in the voice of The Tin Woodman of Oz, King Tut, The United States of America, an unnamed detective of the hard-boiled variety, the *commedia dell'arte* character Punchinello, and others. The voice in "To the Poet" is that of the poem itself addressing its writer. One day, a while back, I started to write a poem in the voice of a young woman. After I'd gotten to the middle of the second page, I realized that a story was implied. Usually my poems veer away from narrative implications, elaborating character at the expense of plot. So it was a surprise to see, suddenly, that I had arrived at the beginning of a thriller. Carrying on, I was interested mostly in hearing the voice of Fiona, my protagonist, so I had to give her something to talk about: the crisis that set the plot in motion and then the events and other characters that carry the plot along.

Of course, Fiona isn't always able to stay focused on the crisis. Subject to "racing thoughts," as she calls them, she talks about her sexuality and her various lovers, her looks and her image as it appears in fashion photographs, the relations between image and reality, reality and fantasy, the fantasy of fashion and the supposed seriousness of art, and blah, blah, blah, as she would say. Always, though, she tries to keep her mind on solving the problems stirred up by the initial problem and sometimes she succeeds. What she never fails to do is talk, revealing much about herself and something, I hope, about language not as a theorizable system but as a medium for an individual's being. That is what language is for me, a poet, and when I write in other voices they become, in some way, my own.

The usual name for this sort of thing is dramatic monologue, as in Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess*. Browning is important to me, though the main figure here is Eliot, inventor of the voices in "Gerontion," "The Waste Land," "The Coming of the Magi." I've listened to the voices of many other first-person narratives—for instance, Fred Astaire's voice-over in *Band Wagon*'s parody of a hard-boiled story by Mickey Spillane. Then there is Robert Mitchum's voice-over in *Out of the Past*, Fred MacMurray's in *Double Indemnity*, the voices of Huck Finn, Holden Caulfield, the voices in Elizabethan drama, Shakespeare, of course; but also Thomas Middleton, whose tough, unadorned dialogue is so powerful, and the quick, brilliantly ungrammatical dialogue in Elmore Leonard's novels—many voices, but not a cacophony. Following Fiona's comments, quips, speculations, and recollections wherever they took me, I was sustained by the belief that an invented voice, if it is fully imagined, can make an individual's way of being intimately intelligible.

RAIL: Your mention of Elmore Leonard prompts me to ask your thoughts on detective writing as a genre. Who are your favorite detective writers? Are there any particular passages that have stayed with you?

RATCLIFF: My favorite passage from a hard-boiled novel begins with the protagonist of Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* downing his second laudanum-laced gin and drifting into a dream of trying to catch up with a woman whose name he can't remember: "I walked streets hunting for her, half the streets in the United States, Gay Street and Mount Royal Avenue in Baltimore, Colfax Avenue in Denver [...]" On and on, from street to street in city after city, with nothing to suggest that his trek will ever end. It's an image of the American infinite, the subject of my Pollock book, *The Fate of a Gesture*. Whenever people mention Hammett, they also mention Raymond Chandler, another of my favorites, which also include more obscure figures from the 1930s—Paul Cain, Horace McCoy. And I like Georges Simenon, his Inspector Maigret stories, of course, but even more the stories he called *romans durs*. One of them, *Tropic Moon*, published in 1933, is a crime story that, almost incidentally, conveys full-blast the horror of a French colonial regime in Africa.

Novels of all sorts can tell us much about the world. If you ever want to get the lowdown on a low-end dental practice in San Francisco in the 1890s, just read Frank Norris's *McTeague*. But I don't read crime stories because

I want to know about crime—though some of the cons, swindles, and scams in Elmore Leonard's novels are undeniably fascinating. The point, for me, is in the way the livelier crime stories elaborate the selves of their leading characters, often with extravagant results. And this gives these stories a similarity to poetry, which is often if not always an elaboration of the poet's self, as is most of the art that interests me. The self, after all, is the abiding subject of art and literature in the modern period, which, by my reckoning, begins at some point in the 18th century. So I see the United States Constitution, ratified in 1789, as a piece of collaborative writing that reimagined relations between self and state in a radical new way. And in a shameful way, when it came to black selves.

The Great Gatsby; John Ashbery's "These Lacustrine Cities;" Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Times*; Donald E. Westlake's screenplay for *The Grifters*, which he adapted from truly hard-boiled story by Jim Thompson; The Wilder-Brackett-Marshman screenplay for *Sunset Boulevard*—all are favorites because they throw the idea of the self up for grabs with powerfully ambiguous and troubling results. What I don't like is the genteel sort of poetry and fiction that tries to manage the idea of the self, to tamp down its unruly energies, the better to integrate orderly images of individuality into images of a tame and orderly society. I don't want to name names here, just to say that a lot of supposedly "serious" literary writing is so boring that I can't read more than a few sentences of it at a time. It puts nothing at stake, except standardized, readymade notions of "interpersonal conflict" and "self-realization," in contrast to the fictions I like, which make up their notions of the self and everything else as they go along.

RAIL: Picking up on your fascinating thoughts on the intermingling of literary genres, in which the idea of being true to "unruly energies," as you call them, is more important than the genre per se, I want to ask you about something in your last response. You said that "the livelier crime stories elaborate the selves of their leading characters, often with extravagant results — and this gives these stories a similarity to poetry [...]" Turning now to your fantastically elaborate, and at the same time critically hard-boiled and matter-of-fact recently published novel, *Tequila Mockingbird*—and maybe before even getting to the specific elaborations you enact in your main character, Fiona, and her significantly blank and flawless counterpart, Brenda—tell me something about how you prepared for this outing. That is to say, the action is set within the fashion world, a world that many readers might not imagine your following in intimate detail. How much research did you have to do? Did you actually go to fashion shows or shoots or interview people in the industry? For me personally, while every page of *Tequila Mockingbird* is delightfully surprising, it does not surprise me—in fact it makes perfect sense—that you would take the fashion world as a setting. For one thing, I always remember, in your monograph on Red Grooms, how you detailed what Red wore to a series of openings. It makes perfect sense that what an artist wears would tell us something about who they are as an artist. After all, artists invent their notions of their selves as much as authors do with the characters they create, don't you think?

RATCLIFF: To address your last question first: yes, absolutely—among every ambitious artist's works of the imagination is a thoroughly developed self-image. This invention is what I call *the figure of the artist*: a version of the artist more fully adequate to the artist's oeuvre than his or her everyday self could ever be. Jackson Pollock was hopelessly inadequate to just about everything but he did manage to imagine a self at a heroic scale and to paint his major works from within that idea of himself. Or you could say that to paint was, for him, to impersonate this heroic version of Jackson Pollock. He may have thought of this heroic self as his *true* self, but I don't think truth is in play here. It's about fictions, imaginative inventions, and I've thought for years—though I've never published anything about it—that these invented selves, these figures of the artist, are indispensable not only to artists but to the very idea of art in our times. Or possibly ever

since the Renaissance. For sheer, brazen self-invention, it's hard to top the version of Benvenuto Cellini that he gets across in the autobiography he began writing in the 1550s.

Clothes are important to everyone's self-image, and especially tricky for artists and others—poets, for example—who make large claims for their individuality. Artists and poets have to dress in ways that work in their various milieux. In other words, they have to conform to some degree. Yet they have to stand out without seeming simply odd. The look has to advance the self's claim to its exceptional nature. As I said, it's tricky and some very ambitious artists solved the problem by ignoring it. De Kooning wore work clothes during working hours and afterwards, for the most part. When a jacket and tie were required he met the requirement in the plainest possible way, so his self-invention shows elsewhere.

When Fiona, the protagonist of *Tequila Mockingbird*, is working, she wears whatever she's told to wear. She's a fashion model, that's her job. When she's not working, she wears whatever she thinks is going to help her get what she wants. If she thinks she's more likely to get what she wants by getting her dinner partner to look down the front of her blouse, she dresses accordingly. Her wardrobe decisions are thoroughly practical, whether she's sparring with her ex-husband or talking her way past the doorman at the villain's apartment building or spending time with someone she's crazy about.

Because fashion is Fiona's medium, so to speak, she is constantly mentioning the names of designers and couture houses. Their inventions supply her with materials for her various self-inventions. I knew some of these names before I began writing *Tequila Mockingbird*. Others I had to check out and still others I invented. And I invented some of the details of the photo shoots and fashion shows that appear in the story—or extrapolated them from my memories of photo shoots and fashion shows I've attended over the years. Certain bits of behavior, turns of phrase, stuck with me. A model's portfolio is called a "look-book." Or so I thought until a man who runs a

modeling agency read the manuscript at a certain point and said, "Oh, no, nobody uses that phrase any more. It's just called a 'book.'" But then I ran across someone else in the biz who still used "look-book," and I realized what everyone knows. In writing a story, there is a lot of latitude. It's a fiction, not a documentary, so the question is: what sustains it? What keeps it going? In *Tequila Mockingbird*, it's Fiona's voice.

RAIL: Could you talk a little more about how clothes are important to self-image? In particular, I am curious about the clothing/nakedness dichotomy that permeates Fiona's character. She is hyper-aware, one might say, of her nakedness — particularly when she is performing, but, as you note, she is always performing in one way or another.

RATCLIFF: A self-image is a social image—an image one presents to an audience of other selves, because the very idea of a self makes sense only in a social setting. So what is one trying to get across? For an example from the fashion world, one could look at Alexander Liberman. He was known in the art world as a painter and a sculptor but he was also the editorial director of *Vogue* and all the other Condé-Nast magazines. Not a single page was published without his approval. Now, there were people at *Vogue* who put a lot of time and energy into very fancy, very stylish outfits—costumes, really. But Liberman always wore a dark gray suit with a dark gray or black tie. In an accounting firm, he would have been just another guy in a dark suit. At *Vogue*, his dark suit signified his superiority to fashion. Fashion changes, it is always desperate, insecure, putting up a brave front, but Liberman never changed. He was always the one in charge of which fashions became visible and to what degree, and his dark suit signaled his possession of that immutable authority.

Fiona is too generous to think much about authority. It's not that she makes a point of being a nice person, it's just that she's wired for generosity—in bed, in her friendships,

with her spare time, and her money. There's a moment when she feels empathy even for "hard-working polymers" as they go about the task for which some chemist designed them. But she can exert authority when she has to—when a really annoying photographer gets on her nerves, for example, and she feels she has to put her foot down and tell him to shape up and quit pissing her off. Sometimes she pushes back against the bossiness of Abigail, her booker. There is that scene, early on, where she gets naked for the sake of putting Abigail on the defensive. And on occasion she uses her nakedness as a challenge to some unpleasant male figure. At other times it's a tried-and-true method for attracting attention and then there is the practical matter of getting undressed for sex.

We tend to see naked/dressed as an opposition, a stable binarism like open/closed, but no binarism is stable, and for Fiona being clothed is a variation on being unclothed. In one of the fashion-shoot scenes, she talks about a dress being so well fitted that it shows her "girl abs." She always dresses herself in a way that makes her naked self immediately imaginable, and not always because her clothes are revealing or tight. It's because she knows how to put together outfits that transmit her energy, her presence. Wherever she is, naked or clothed, she is always unreservedly *there*.

RAIL: Would you say that Fiona learns something through the course of *Tequila Mockingbird*? Is her story in a way a *bildungsroman*? Do you have plans for another novel?

RATCLIFF: Fiona does learn something in the course of the story, though she doesn't have the slightest idea of it until the very last few pages—and of course I don't want to say much about her big insight except that, just before the realization hits, she feels it coming and gets undressed. To be new-born. And I do have plans for a continuation of Fiona's story. Fiona maturing, at least in some respects. I don't think she will ever entirely get over her habit of seeing the world refracted through the books she read when she was very young. ☞