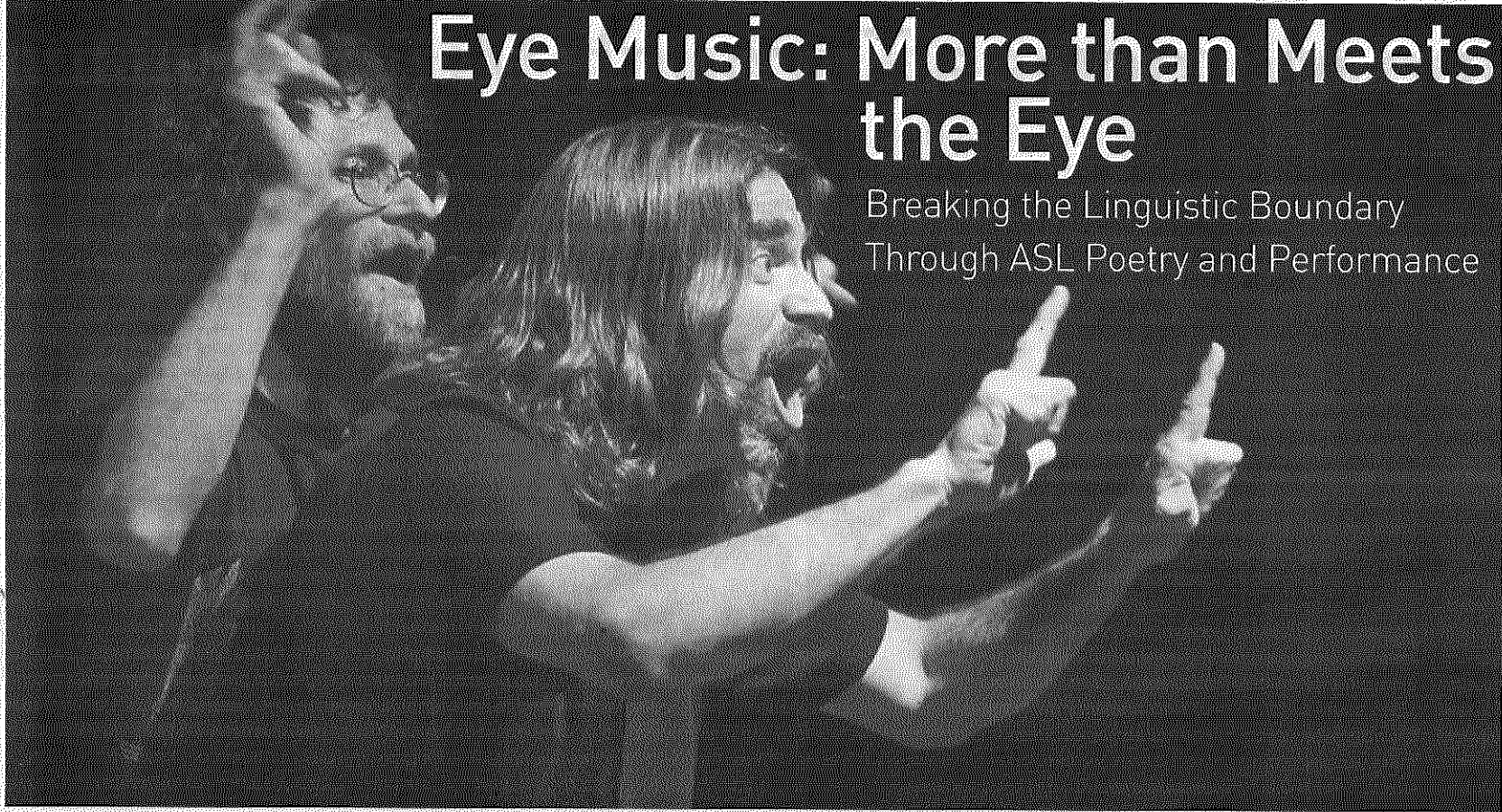


POETRY

# Eye Music: More than Meets the Eye

Breaking the Linguistic Boundary Through ASL Poetry and Performance



COURTESY OF EYE MUSIC

Kenny Lerner (left) and Peter Cook (right) perform ASL poetry together as the Flying Words Project. Lerner is shown interpreting Cook's ASL gestures as Cook makes use of animated facial expressions, a feature of non-manual communication, one of the five indicators of ASL poetry and performance.

BY REUBEN BARRACK

Peter Cook became Deaf when he was 3 years old, enduring all of his adolescence without learning American Sign Language (ASL) until he was 19. For the first time in his life, Cook felt he had a language, and was able to communicate with those who could understand him. ASL poet Karen Christie feels similarly.

"I'm tempted to resort to the many metaphors Deaf folks use when describing finally being exposed to ASL," Christie wrote via email. "The most apt is related to finally coming home for the first time, fully feeling one's self ... leaving a meal feeling satisfied or having a thirst quenched ... reaching a self-knowing."

Christie and ASL poet Patrick Graybill introduced the Eye Music performance as opening acts for Cook and Kenny Lerner, known as the Flying Words Project. With the exception of Lerner, every ASL artist who performed is Deaf.

UC Santa Cruz music professor Larry Polansky curated the festival, the first of its kind at the UC. With initial support from the Porter Hitchcock Poetry Fund, the Eye Music festival reached fruition two years in the making. Polansky continued to gather support from other UCSC programs, such as the Arts Dean's Fund for Excellence.

Prior to teaching at UCSC, Polansky was a professor at Dartmouth University, where he taught a class about Deaf culture. He focused on the medium of ASL poetry and performance. Lectures included guest performances by well-known ASL poets, such as Graybill.

"Larry sees ASL like it's music," Graybill said in ASL, through an interpreter. "After working with him at Dartmouth, I was very impressed with his enthusiasm and his belief in ASL."

Considering Polansky and Graybill's previous collaborations, it seemed only fitting to bring Graybill to UCSC to share his passion for ASL poetry with the Santa Cruz community, along with Christie, Cook and Lerner.

ASL poetry consists of five specific indicators for performance. These include hand shape, location of the sign, palm orientation, movement of the sign and non-manual communication. Facial expression is one example of a non-manual marker, which Cook implements in his poetry.

Cook performed the political poem "Made in the USA," during which he critiqued the idea that most of our clothing is made in China. Through exhaustive and puzzled facial expressions, Cook created the story of a seamstress drenched in sweat while making clothes in a factory that never stops running.

"Glossing," which involves borrowing vocabulary from English to represent ASL signs, is another device in ASL poetry. In contrast, "fingerspelling" involves translating English into signs without incorporating ASL, which often leads to spelling out whole words with the use of the fingers.

"Fingerspelling is a conduit to what I would call hegemonic language," Polansky said. "The split between the hearing community and the Deaf community is very severe. There is no casual bilingualism."

This linguistic barrier can often make it difficult to translate ASL poetry into English. The main problem is ASL and English are two completely different languages, derived of certain structural elements that cause most words or gestures to be lost in translation.

"Translating any poetry is impossible, and translating ASL

to English is doubly impossible," Polansky said. "I don't see any virtue to not doing it, as long as we have the original poetry. The harm is only done to the receiver. There is no violence done to the poetry."

ASL gives poets like Patrick Graybill and Peter Cook the opportunity to convey multiple meanings through two simultaneous hand gestures, something those of the hearing community cannot accomplish through speech. In Graybill's poem "Reflection," he physically plays with the title of the poem. One hand conveys the hand shape for reflection, while the other hand, placed below, visually creates a reflection of the other hand.

"I consider this to be Deaf gain, rather than hearing loss," Graybill said.

Although Graybill was excited to expose ASL poetry to UCSC students, he also expressed his interest in

bringing together members of the Deaf community in Santa Cruz up to campus.

"It's good for the Deaf community to realize we don't have to stay hidden," Graybill said. "We can have an open dialogue and communication about all of this [so we can] learn more about each other."

One of the most memorable moments of this performance was when Cook and Lerner asked the audience to participate in retelling the "Evolution of Man" through ASL. Audience members were divided into sections in which they had to act out the moment of the Big Bang — fish swimming in the ocean, lizards walking on dry land and apes transforming into humans.

Until finally, Man arrived, proceeding to burp after sipping from a beer can, only to eject those burp particles back into the air, joining

with the same stars that formed the Big Bang. This festival acknowledges the sense of community we should all be sharing with one another, working together to erode this "invisible divide" between the Deaf and hearing communities.

"There's a common connection between me, Peter and Patrick," music professor Polansky said. "We're [all] artists."

Polansky further reiterated the importance of ASL for not only the Deaf and hearing communities in Santa Cruz, but also the impact it should have on our country at large.

"[ASL] is an American language. It's an American art form," Polansky said. "These are great artists, but they have a very limited audience, primarily because of a linguistic boundary. The more people who make the effort to communicate with the [Deaf] community, the better off everybody would be." ♣



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