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Second Wave Works of 'Blank Generation' Displayed for All to Ponder

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By Bill Eichenberger, Dispatch Book Critic

A copy of *Lost & Found Times* -- titled that summer 33 -- is featured in "An American Avant Garde: Second Wave Exhibition" at Ohio State University.

The magazine opens with:

"They floated past the peas and corn, / the leader says, his voice turning / her cheek. Then she smiled and mouthed / for me for gas money or burned hoses, / of hungry lions."

Confused?

"The idea is to distract the reader from his or her preconceptions about what is supposed to be there," writer John M. Bennett explained, "so that the reader can see something new."

What's likely is that most of the writers included in the exhibit -- on display in the Main Library -- first distracted themselves.

"There are many ways," he said: "You can write when you're exhausted. You can write in a noisy environment. . . . Some writers take drugs."

Bennett, the creator of *Lost & Found Times* and the content provider for a Web site of "visual poems," curated the "Second Wave" exhibit and organized a two-day "Avant Garde Symposium" on the OSU campus.

His suggestion for the uninitiated: Don't bother to look for "meaning" -- at least not in the traditional sense.

"Some of the cleverest stuff looks like it has meaning," he said, "but that's only an illusion. They (avant-garde writers) are playing a trick on you. The surface meaning may be there, but that's not what the piece is really about."

His "first wave" included William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and other so-called beat writers; and was featured last year in an OSU exhibition called "An American Avant Garde: First Wave."

Bennett has dubbed the second wave "the blank generation," in part because of the relative anonymity of its members.

Not even the biggest names -- Richard Kostelanetz, say, or Jim Leftwich or Sheila E. Murphy -- are as well-known as any of the most famous beats.

“Allen Ginsberg was a remarkable hustler and promoter of his friends,” Bennett said. “So the beats were more well-known. Jack Kerouac was accessible in a way that most avant-garde writers today aren’t. And the culture was ready in the 1950s and 1960s for the beats.”

Most writers in the second wave have shunned mass appeal and avoided academia. Many have day jobs, in areas ranging from chemistry to pizza delivery.

“What was happening in universities, what was going on in the culture at large, simply didn’t interest the second wave,” Bennett said. “So individual artists went off and did it themselves, entirely on their own, making what they couldn’t find anywhere else.”

By its nature, the avant-garde operates largely, if not exclusively, outside the mainstream.

Yet it has a traceable history, according to Bennett.

“What usually happens is, mainstream artists become aware of the avant-garde and begin to incorporate avant-garde ideas into their own work. Mainstream artists dilute, adapt, modify and commodify ideas that originated with the avant-garde.”

While writers such as Rimbaud and James Joyce enjoy mainstream popularity, Bennett said, the “continuous history of the avant-garde” is found in the works of lesser-known proponents of experimentalism, including 19th-century French poet Comte de Lautreamont or 20th-century Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro.

The “Second Wave” exhibit features mail art (works sent through the mail), e-mail art, visual poetry (combinations of words and images), concrete poetry (words as images) and other forms.

Presentations will be made by PowerPoint, on CD-ROM, in music and through images accompanied by spoken text -- what Dick Higgins, a primary figure in the avant-garde Fluxus movement, would have called “intermedia.”

The second wave refers to a loose assembly, hardly an organized movement, of like-minded writers.

Even to call it the second wave or the blank generation is to take liberties with the facts.

Still, the writers in the exhibit might have at least one thing in common:

“It’s the conception of language as a part of the human body and a part of the complete human experience,” Bennett said. “It’s a belief that language is a part of the hard wiring of the human mind and the view that language is not separate from the body.”