

## BRENDA COULTAS / FROM THE BOWERY PROJECT

The Bowery Project is centered on documenting and reacting to the layers of debris including human kind that layer the streets of the Bowery in NYC. Specify the brief section between Cooper Union and Houston, an area that contains the remnants of SRO hotels and the remains of the 1890s Bowery that are slated to be demolished by The Bowery Development Plan in the next decade. I live a block from this section and travel through it daily. It will no longer exist by 2010; the artist coop (Kate Millett lives there) that used to be McGurk's Suicide Hall (named so because prostitutes flung themselves out the windows in a symbolic protest of their working conditions), the Sunshine Hotel, and various soup kitchens will be extinct. My intent is not to romanticize the suffering or demonize the Bowery residents but rather to comment on poverty, class, suffering, and my own dilemma and identification as a teacher and poet one paycheck away from the street.

The Bowery Project also draws upon many sources including Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Also Jacob A. Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*, Bernadette Mayer's *Memory*, and Luc Sante's *Low Life*.

## **Bowery Mind**

He said it too (a man in a book about the chicken wire hotels), a mantra I had been saying all along in my head:

When they tear down the bowery  
When they implode the bowery  
When they blow up the bowery  
When they demolish the bowery  
When they revise the bowery  
When they renovate the bowery  
When they deconstruct the bowery

He said they suffered from Bowery mind; the residents never expected to spend the remainder of their lives in single rooms, each taken up by a long narrow bed and hot plate. I said to my husband, "We will live in this apt., these 4 rooms for the rest of our lives. This is where we grow old together. We will never be able to live anywhere else. We'll never have the money or the time to find another place. I am 42." At first it made me cry and then later it became very satisfying to say, "This is the bed, the room, the place I will die in. " It settles the mind. People think it's tragic to be old in New York City, but maybe it's just tragic to be old anyplace.

Once people moved away from farms and came to cities, all saying this is what I did, this is what I did for posterity. Along came me saying this is what I did for poetry. A lot of people came here all at once, this is how and why my tenement exists.

A man lying in a prone position on sidewalk outside the vacant lot. The lot was covered in white poison and cleared off.

The bottles had been getting tall. I could imagine a bottle village or other folk shrine (even the Mennonites in Illinois had a building made of Fresca bottles), but the glass rising to the top of the chain links, like a transparent pool without swimmers. (Afternoon, May 8, '01, Bowery & 1st St.)

He said he was once the most powerful drug dealer on the block and, “go fuck yourself.” I saw him later, carrying around a strange sculpture difficult to describe, because there was no comparison to it in the natural world. (2nd St. & 2nd Ave)

Man carrying a deflated blow-up doll in basket, said he would wash it and hang it on the wall to make a statement, collecting graffiti tags, said he’s going to make a coffee table book. In bodega a man said with body language, give me three numbers, and I’ll give you three in reference to lotto. We both lost the 33 million. (Houston and Allen)

Man with huge, flopping, boil on neck. His hands were empty. ( April 29, ’01 Bleeker and Bowery)

An experience for which I have no comparison, can’t say it was this or that, just it was what it was. It existed. So write “It was late at night, and a fine rain was swirling softly down.... That is when I began this experiment in misery.”

Saw a man carrying a cross and a cane, wearing earphones. His sign said the government broke his legs. (April 28, ’01 9 am. White House Hotel, 3rd & Bowery )

Some might say that all I’ve done is stack up a heap of objects. Some will say it’s all been done before, and that others have done better but still I stack things up. I don’t think about it, I put blinders on. But I hope that through accumulation they’ll form a pattern out of chaos. I’ve stacked up twigs one by one building a structure, weaving and shaping, forming a skeleton out of raw garbage, transformed into beauty, maybe. With something to say to any Bowery resident or reader of poetry. I am intentionally writing for you and me.

Flowers and graffiti for Joey Ramone. (May 1, ’01, CBGB’S, Bleeker & Bowery)

DUMPSTER SURVEILLANCE / A CONVERSATION WITH BRENDA  
COULTAS

**Douglas Manson, Jonathan Skinner & Isabelle Pelissier (from a longer interview transcribed and edited by Douglas Manson)**  
**10.29.00**

*Opening on a recognition of Frederick Law Olmsted's influence in American Cities, the conversation begins:*

**BC:** That look or whatever, that aesthetic, you recognize it once you've been in Brooklyn's Prospect Park, and Central Park, and you can see it, the commonality in those designs is just beautiful, in the space, the open spaces, and nice green lawns. I couldn't articulate it, but I can see that it's the same design.

**DM:** Did you notice that in Louisville?

**BC:** Not really, I think it was really, it was pointed out as a matter of honor, people were proud of it, but it was harder to tell, it might be that it's not the East, it's the South, the northern part of the South, but I'll have to go back and look again, actually. It doesn't have the vast expanse, I think it's a much smaller place.

**DM:** Is it part of a hill?

**BC:** I really can't remember, but it's in the old part of Louisville.

**DM:** But they've changed it.

**BC:** I think that parts of it have been changed, like roads and things, but I guess most of it is still there. I just don't think he had as big of a space to work with, possibly. But it is really cool to see his touch everywhere. I mean, it's a world-class park. Buffalo seems to have a lot of world-class monuments and museums.

**DM:** It's a nice place.

**JS:** World-class, that's what we like to hear. . . . See, there ...(shows Brenda a book).

**BC:** Oh, the Buffalo waterfront.

**JS:** That's where I got a lot of my tape from.

**DM:** We were looking at your book of Olmsted's writing. Did he have European model in mind when he was designing these parks?

**JS:** Absolutely. London, Paris, Frankfurt, Vienna, I'm not sure about Florence.

**DM:** Vienna has a huge central park, doesn't it?

**JS:** It was the whole idea of the radiating avenues. It's weird because he takes this sort-of Fascist aspect of 19th century city planning. Hausmann was putting in the boulevards in Paris.

**DM:** The boulevards, which were rectilinear?

**JS:** Yes, he just plowed through neighborhoods and created these great open spaces with long views. He was Napoleon III's architect. Hausmann put the boulevards through so the troops could get into the center; it was like aerating the city, social hygiene, pushing all the poverty to the outskirts, or underground with construction of the sewers. Olmsted takes that and says, "well, what we should do as cities grow, they should use this model." But he had this democratic version, where you would have all different classes with equal access to the open spaces.

**DM:** You have a very evocative rule, or palette; yet, in some ways, there is something "city" about your writing that some people have mentioned.

**BC:** Oh yes, Lewis Warsh says, ". . .of East Village politics mixed with something else," he says in a little article in the Poetry Project Newsletter about my writing. It [my writing] is certainly very focused on place, and comes out of, well, I didn't leave Indiana until I was thirty-one, so that's one reason why the stories in this book, particularly the earlier things, are very much about Indiana.

**JS:** You had to catch up.

**BC:** (Laughs) it was just catching up. I was just getting it down. But then I go home every summer. It's one of those times when I have a block of time, in which I'm using the setting or whatever found materials are coming my way. That's why Summer Newsreel is about Indiana. It's only this year, in the last year or two that I've started to write about Manhattan, and particularly right now writing about the Bowery. The Bowery also translates as "farm" in Dutch. I didn't realize until a few weeks ago that I was still writing a "farm" poem! (laughter) I didn't make the connection.

[After a brief discussion of Ed Sanders's "Investigative Poetics."]

**DM:** In your work [Brenda], you're not collecting. That's not the nature of it, to collect. You said that it is very important that the place is what you speak. Speak from? or about?

**BC:** Probably from in a certain sense. I mean, when I was a young girl and I thought about, I mean, I read a lot, and I thought about want-

ing to be a writer and that I would write something that I thought was not patronizing or condescending to hicks and hillbillies like myself (laughs). I would read these things where you were being stereotyped as a redneck, or an idiot because you were a rural person. So I wanted, hopefully, to convey the life of the mind, of rural life, or sensibilities or concerns or talks. So I hoped to capture some of that, even though that book [Early Films] largely reflects a lot of years of violence in the work that I did; I was an officer then. And then also just being stalked all the time as a young woman. In any Midwestern state if you're a young woman living alone you're a sort of target, you know, people watch you and they follow you.

**DM:** Do you think that has a lot to do with the great degree of dispersion of people?

**BC:** I think it has to do with being an object of desire and fantasy, when you're young, when you're eighteen, particularly. That's like the American idea of the sexual treasure, you know, trophy. And so when I was eighteen I worked at Firestone Steel, and I was one of five women out of two hundred men in a factory, so I got lots of attention (laughs). I was the object of desire in this machine-driven environment.

**JS:** A good blurb for *Dancer In The Dark*, then. I thought that sequence in the factory was great.

**BC:** I did relate to the "machine" parts. The factory part you would love. I loved the factory work, and the rhythm of the factory work.

**JS:** [does a beatbox]

**DM:** But isn't it interesting that Bjork gets those rhythms going, but she sings at a completely different tempo and bases her melodic line on that. She's singing to some other sound. Would you say that was going on when you became a writer, that it would have to go counter to the rhythms that you were among?

**BC:** I'm not sure, I mean that book [Early Films] is so awkwardly written. It's like learning to write, like any first book. I think that I was having such trouble in getting the language to do what I wanted it to do. So I think there is a lot of awkward prose. But it has a vernacular and idiosyncratic feel, as far as speech patterns go. Those are very present, the Hoosierisms and slang, things that simply aren't grammatically correct because it is the way of hearing, and trying to get it down. Trying to get language to bend to your will. So there's a lot of awkwardness in this particular book. Some of the speech is, just the way that it reads, a little off. Which I try to use, the offness of it. but

it does have a certain regional feel that I did want to keep, the idiosyncracies . . . I think every writer fantasizes, has a very modest fantasy, that they could find a cheap place to live in a very rural community, and hopefully write, and write something of interest, from this very isolated place. It's a very pragmatic, you know, just a utilitarian approach towards trying to create a life for yourself as a writer. A life that allows you to write, and to have an audience, maybe, somewhere out there, somewhere. You would send your work out to magazines, or whatever. You would be able to live on very little. You have that fantasy, I think.

**JS:** Do you think it's possible?

**DM:** Like Thoreau. . .

**BC:** Like Thoreau [laughs]. Actually I've been thinking a lot about Thoreau.

**JS:** Living deliberately.

**BC:** I suppose so. I think you make a plan like that in the back of your mind as a writer, you know, "how am I going to keep writing? How am I going to do it?" How are you going to do it?

**DM:** To get to the cottage.

**BC:** What do you really need to have this life? And what are you willing to give up for it? How will you make it happen? It being that there's absolutely no money. In fact, it will cost you money to do it. You give up all the energy that would go towards careers, or running a business.

**JS:** Or having children. All sorts of things.

**BC:** Yeah. It goes towards the writing instead of going towards those other of things. But it's a different life. It's certainly a worthy life to have, you know. . . . I have my own Bowery Project as juxtaposed to the Mayor's Bowery Project, in my poem.

**IP:** Oh, you'll be the independent candidate.

**BC:** So we'll see how that poem does this, if it ever ends up working. I started out thinking about surveying dumpsters, and doing dumpster diving, and writing a series of poems about dumpster diving, about objects, starting with the objects. But then I didn't see any great garbage for awhile. That's a big problem.

**IP:** Oh yes, once you start your project all the great garbage disappears.

**BC:** Yeah, so you go through a period where you don't see any really cool garbage that gets you going, but then when you see some great, mysterious garbage, then you're on again. But the chances of it coming across your way are, you know, rare.

**JS:** How does garbage speak to you?

**BC:** [laughs] Speak to me? “Narll. Uuuh, hnnnh” [laughs]

**DM:** What is interesting about garbage? I mean, because I think there’s always been, for artists, a sort of fascination with it.

**BC:** Well, it’s because they’re so poor.

**DM:** It’s not scatological in any way.

**BC:** We’re fucking poor!

**DM:** I see. We need that stuff!

**BC:** It’s cheap material. We need it.

**JS:** Or do you feel that it’s a more interesting topic, now, more than ever before: garbage?

**BC:** I think it’s maybe more spoken about. It’s perhaps not as taboo to talk about dumpster diving, and waste. Because poets and artists, and particularly visual artists, are always doing found object collages and assemblages. You go to the salvage yard to get your materials. It’s the same thing, you’re looking to the garbage for what it says about society, and it’s also a little bit of Sophie Calle, where she looks at the contents of the luggage, the things that people bring to the hotel room. And you’re also looking at what people are throwing out, and what it says about them.

**IP:** Yeah, its the same thing, it’s like describing something in an oblique way.

**JS:** I’ve spoken with elderly people who always tell me that in the twenties and thirties in America there was much less garbage because there was no packaging, I mean, much less packaging. You had canned food, and you had stuff in bulk, but you didn’t have a little box or wrapper around every little thing.

**DM:** But is that stuff still garbage? Those wrappers and plastic crinkle bags, that stuff we still reject. I mean, I think in some ways the things we deal with are things we still want to be in circulation.

**IP:** This is it! this is it, because . . .

**DM:** The other things are things that have become impossible to use.

**JS:** That’s what I mean in “what do you mean by garbage?” It includes that.

**IP:** Discarded things.

**BC:** Anything in the dump.

**JS:** Things or just materials?

**DM:** The object is still there, though. A piece of steel, or. . .

**BC:** Whatever it is that is discarded.



**IP:** For me, what I like about it is I'm trying to save things that will disappear and will never be made again, because what is made new is going to be a cheaper material, it's going to last an even shorter time, it's going to be less beautiful, it's like trying to grab the last nice things that you can put your hands on.

**DM:** [begins talking with Isabelle about Electric Tower insulators and how to procure them]

**JS:** Are we talking about "found objects" or are we talking about "trash"?

**BC:** Both.

**JS:** Both?

**BC:** Because the trash can be a found object, or vice versa. It just depends on the eyes of the finder. "One man's trash is another man's treasure."

**DM:** I was going to ask about that, it was going to be the joke question, on what you feel is your relationship to the transcendentalists.

**BC:** Oh, well the poem I'm working on now talks a lot about transcendentalism, and Thoreau, and thinking about the Bowery as Walden, and just that sort of thing. I don't know if that idea will . . .

**DM:** Great. Do you see it as a wilderness? As a place away from other parts of American culture, society, concern?

**BC:** Yeah, I mean, I see that the wilderness exists within the city. And so, the Bowery, with those vacant lots, the street life and subculture, is where the wilderness exists.

**DM:** No Man's Land.

**BC:** Yeah.

**DM:** Where the bourgeois fear to tread, is in some way . . .

**BC:** Except that they don't, they're like buying all the . . .

**JS:** They like all of the property.

**BC:** It's the opposite.

**DM:** Oh, they're all over it, they're buying it up.

**BC:** But maybe they'll keep . . . maybe the parts on the other side of the Bowery will stay intact.

**DM:** So there's something organic about what forms in those sort of vacated spaces that would lend itself to a relationship with the transcendentalists.

**BC:** Those empty lots. I was also thinking about the experiment in Walden of going out into nature and finding sustenance from the land, and doing that in the city, from garbage.

**DM:** The dumpster.

**BC:** Garbage, that would be the equivalent.

**JS:** What about animals in the city?

**BC:** I haven't seen too many.

**JS:** Have you ever tried stalking in the city?

**BC:** Stalking an animal? [laughs] No.

**DM:** Tracking, and hunting? You could stalk rats.

**BC:** It could be. I see human animals.

**JS:** Really, at night. There's a guy, this guy Tom Brown who does stalking workshops in New Jersey. He's stalked in the city at night, and there are all these packs of feral cats and dogs, and different kinds of animals that peek out at night, through holes, the lycanthropes.

**BC:** I haven't seen them, there are some cats, though.

**IP:** Wolves.

**DM:** Just to watch them, just to do an ethology or something, an ethology on a wild pack of dogs?

**JS:** Ethology, exactly.

**DM:** So what happens?

**JS:** There are these different, parallel habitats that are happening. Birds, too, and the eagles, the peregrines that are nesting on some of the towers in the city.

**BC:** Well, now I'll look out for that. I'll have to watch for that, now.

**IP:** All kinds of weirdness comes from being in the city.

**JS:** Because you're not the only person, the only being, that's collecting trash and garbage, there. You're out there with a lot of them.

**DM:** So it's like Darwin, all these different species that arise on the buildings.

**IP:** Yes, they engineer themselves, they modify themselves, in the city, yes.

**DM:** They have labs? Or are they doing their own . . .

**IP:** They're doing their own sensitive mutations.

**DM:** That's just called "breeding" . . . "reproduction"

**IP:** I guess, with a little, uh, engineering taking place.

**BC:** [to Jonathan] Yeah, they're collecting, too. Out there, there must be animal cultures, animal kingdoms.

**JS:** You've got a lot of colleagues out there, amongst the other species.

**BC:** Certainly the rats. Now I'll have to look out, maybe I'll add that to . . .

**JS:** Muskrats, maybe.

**BC:** Maybe I'll pay attention to that.

**JS:** Just see what you see.

**BC:** See what I see?

**JS:** I'm just curious, you can report to me, just let me know, send me an e-mail,

and say if you saw something.

**DM:** So the four farming poems in *Boyeye* are interesting.

**JS:** The Future Farmers of America.

**DM:** I think you mentioned one, Isabelle, the one about the balls, the hayroll. That you would take all that, sort of, ubiquity of that world, I guess, and make it into a fantastic landscape.

**BC:** Yeah, there were a lot of those hayballs around that summer.

**IP:** My God! It's true, Brenda, I mean, now I'm stuck with this for life. I'm stuck with this for life.

**BC:** Yeah, but now you see them everywhere.

**DM:** So did this happen every summer?

**JS:** You know who said a really funny thing? Brian Collier pointed out that this time of year, like, next month, they cover the hayballs with white plastic, so they look like fields of giant marshmallows.

**IP:** [laughs]

**DM & BC:** [simultaneously] Yeah, that's true.

**BC:** They are very beautiful, and I started noticing them a few years ago, and I was trying to find some way to talk about them, because they're so beautiful.

**JS:** But hay is a really potent substance. I mean, it's actually interesting that its served as this kind of bucolic material and image, because it's really uncomfortable, it makes you sneeze. It can be really toxic, actually. You get what's called "farmer's lung" working in silos.

**IP:** Oh come on, Jonathan. There are enough toxic things, you don't have to attack hayballs.

**BC:** [laughs] No, it didn't occur to me.

**JS:** It builds up nitrous oxide, you know, and carbon dioxide, when it's first put into the silos.

**DM:** Yeah. They explode, silos explode.

**BC:** The hayballs are part of the Americana I'm talking about. Just things in the American landscape.

**DM:** These toxic balls rolling over America?

**BC:** I was thinking more of gonads.

**DM:** Yeah, that comes through.

**BC:** I was thinking of being a woman, and, you know, balls.

**Everyone:** Of course, of course.

**DM:** That's clear, a ballsy land.