

The Literary Journal of the University of Montana

CUTBANK INTERVIEWS: A conversation between Randee Silv and Janis Holm

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Writer Janis Butler Holm recently sat down with publisher, writer, and artist Randee Silv to share a conversation about the convergences of writing, art, publishing, craft, and the roadblocks, resistances, and serendipities of being writers in the world.

Holm: You're the founder and chief editor of Arteidolia Press, a prestigious publisher of experimental work. And you also edit *swifts & slows: a quarterly of crisscrossings*, a magazine for poetry, visual poetry, and collaborative projects, and *Arteidolia*, a destination for innovative art and writing. How did these publications come to be?

Silv: At a time when online magazines hadn't yet hit the mainstream publishing world, I was invited to write for one of the first digital arts magazines for artists by artists, *Resolve 40*. The editors, Mark Wiener and Linda DiGusta, focused on the New York art world from the artist perspective. Sadly, a few years later Mark passed, and I was asked if I'd like to take over as editor. How could I say no? I was also involved with another NYC online/print publication, but it was forced to shut down because of legal complications with its name.

After I kept hearing more and more about the pluses of building a website using WordPress instead of HTML, I decided it was the moment for me to launch my own publication. So, in 2013 *art + pareidolia* became *Arteidolia*, an ad-free, noncommercial visual platform for artists, musicians, poets to re-approach, re-consider, re-rethink visual/sound/word.

Looking to branch out in other directions, I put together *swifts & slows: a quarterly of crisscrossings* in 2018, a literary journal with a slightly different spin that would feature collaborations. After fourteen issues, we've now opened it up to also include work by solo poets.

Starting a small press has always been on the back burner, but the quantities required for offset printing kept putting it on hold. Since I was not a fan of print-on-demand services, I had to convince myself that if I wanted to do a press, this was the route that would get me started. In 2021 I went for it.

Holm: Running a small press must have its challenges—what might some of those be? Where is Arteidolia Press located? Does the location influence your operations? And how do you decide which authors you'll publish?

Silv: With so many innovative and independent presses publishing outstanding work, how could I—as an artist, writer, editor—add another dimension, another perspective to an already very dynamic conversation? Response. I just jumped right in and followed my instincts. From cover design to getting books into the hands of readers, there's no shortage of unexpected surprises. It's like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Challenges. They keep it interesting.

We're in Ridgewood, Queens, which is about 20 minutes by subway to Manhattan. With the Internet, location these days doesn't seem to matter. Our titles are sold in neighborhood bookstores, and we're looking forward to doing more local events this year.

As editor, I'm constantly reviewing a diversity of manuscripts, looking for those voices that push the gamut of possibilities. I'm interested in work that leans away from the ordinary and more towards uncharted territories, that embodies a rhythmic flow, a captivating spark. The press does gravitate towards poetry, but we welcome submissions in all forms.

Establishing a mutual working relationship with each author is essential to make sure that everything, from beginning to end, is clear and understood. We don't claim to have any magic ingredients to bring quick success to authors. Our commitment is simply to make sure that each book turns out to be a gem. It's about building community and giving authors who might be under the radar a chance for their work to be seen.

Holm: What, specifically, in your background prepared you for running an experimental press and two magazines?

Silv: I guess I could trace it back to editor and watercolorist Irving Stettner's tiny East Village apartment in the late 70s, when we photocopied and hand-stapled his magazine *Stroker*, which featured among its many contributors the writings and drawings of Henry Miller. From there I got involved with a small press run by a poet across the hall from where I lived. I never really had much of a taste for anything commercial. I was more into making artist books by hand, which I haven't stopped doing since.

I've always been inspired by collaborations between poets and painters: Joan Mitchell and Nathan Kernan. Frank O'Hara with Franz Kline. Add to the mix publications such as Philip Pavia and Natalie Edgar's *It Is. A Magazine for Abstract Art* (NYC, 1958-65), by artists for artists, which centered on the New York School. Wolfgang Paalen's counter-surrealist journal, *Dyn* (Mexico, 1942-45), which addressed that which is possible in art and thought. So much brewing. Digesting. Absorbing. Fast forward. These are among the roots of how I approach being an editor.

Holm: What has been your experience as an editor of three distinct entities? Tell us what your typical day involves. Could you give us examples of the kinds of work you've published?

Silv: I spend a lot of time thinking about how to keep each publication vivid and engaging. Since we're all constantly bombarded with information and more information, what can I put out there that's meaningful to readers? How do I create an inviting space that draws their attention, stimulates their curiosity, and offers them something worthwhile? I'm always asking myself what can I add to the mix, what distinguishes what I do from other publications, what can I do as an

editor that might make a difference to an already overloaded environment. What is relevant? Magnetic? Is it possible to present work that provokes, that inspires, that can actually generate and enliven ideas and thoughts rather than just be read over quickly and forgotten?

Each publication is connected and influences the other. There's flexibility. There are options. Submissions come in on a regular basis. Reading. Reviewing. Considering. Rereading. Keeping up with correspondence. Decision-making. Once work has been accepted for *Arteidolia* or *swifts & slows*, there's the layout and design work. If it's a full book for the press, there's the detailed crafting of a pdf version, including front and back cover and proof copy approvals before it can be released.

Like most editors, I do have a particular artistic vision and sensibility. I'm continually asking myself what is it that catches my attention and possibly others'. I'm always open for the unexpected.

What we publish depends so much on what comes in. We're not a nonprofit. We don't have any funding sources, but *Arteidolia* does have a group of dedicated writers who appreciate the opportunity to see their essays, reviews, and interviews published.

For *swifts & slows*, submissions, whether text or visual, need to work individually but also as a part of a group. I see myself acting as a composer or as a director coordinating a performance.

So far, *Arteidolia* Press has published poetry, collage, and essays on music and art. Our latest release is *Maze Poems*, by David Harrison Horton, where he's constructed various maze patterns in which, through the surrealist practice of automatic writing, a single train of thought becomes the shape of its maze. Upcoming will be Neil Flory's collection of poetry *mudtrombones knotted in the spill*, where he puts disorder into order using language that mirrors the thought processes of the mind, innovative punctuation, and non-linear progression of ideas and images.

Holm: Has the global pandemic affected your editorial duties in particular ways? The pandemic aside, what do you find frustrating or difficult in your role as editor? What do you most enjoy?

Silv: The pandemic has definitely given me more time to focus on these projects. But what's most challenging as an editor is curating submissions. Many write intricate cover letters about their work and themselves. I can feel their strong commitment to what they're doing, but if the work doesn't click, it doesn't click. I've also noticed that many don't seem to actually visit our website and see what we do.

But once work has been selected, I really enjoy getting to know authors and collaborating in the creative process of putting their work together for publication. Once the latest issue of *swifts & slows* is out or a book is finally released, the sense of accomplishment settles in. Positive feedback does give me that jolt to keep at it.

Holm: How would you describe your own creative writing? Can you tell us what motivates you to put words together? Do you have specific rituals before writing? How do you get in "the zone"?

Silv: While I was rewriting short stories through paring them down, I wanted to see if I could write one simple but dense paragraph minus the clutter and unnecessary spaces in between.

Years later, when I was writing reviews of art exhibitions, I also wrote pieces that reassembled fragments of triggered observations, critiques, satirical bits of artspeak into ironic, absurd descriptions.

Then I found myself condensing and rearranging even further, eventually landing on what I call wordslabs. A mix of multiple flavors, flash fiction, film noir, humor, commentary, outrage, and spontaneous combustion. I shuffle, delete, and reimagine words as sound combinations until there's a rhythm, a pulse. I'm looking for a certain strength of presence that stems also from what's not being said, breaking continuity and disrupting ordinary meaning to evoke tensions through suspension. I'm unattached. No particular rituals. Nothing forced. Nothing planned. Nothing scheduled. It's either happening or it isn't.

Holm: You're not only an editor and writer—you're a painter. How would you describe your art? Do you see a clear connection between writing and painting?

Silv: I think I'll skip over the details about having studios and losing studios, like the rooftop one that overlooked the sea in this Portuguese fishing village that had no electricity or my last one in Bushwick before gentrification hit hard.

In the early 80s, I'd found this indescribable freedom using oil sticks, totally different from oil pastels or applying paint with a brush. The resistance of working directly on the floor with unstretched canvas gave me a kinetic looseness and force as textures and shapes surfaced.

There was a time when all I listened to in my studio was John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* over and over and over, a deepness that gave my strokes no boundaries. I was also absorbed with the ritual dance and music of the Gnawa whom we recorded with in Essaouira, Morocco.

I've always been an abstract painter. That was my starting point. I was never really interested in representational forms or in breaking down and abstracting them.

I delved further into the origins of mark-making. David Lewis-Williams wrote about entoptic phenomena, which are what we see on the edge of vision, visual percepts wired into us.

Instead of looking only at photographs, I traveled to France and Spain to go inside Paleolithic caves, where abstract marks predate iconic imagery. I stood in front of 40,800-year-old "red dots" from the Panel of Hands in Cueva de El Castillo, which was at that time Europe's oldest dated art, 4000 years before Chauvet's black charcoal rhinoceros. I was convinced. I even titled an exhibition of mine *Endangered Gestures*.

How I painted morphed into how I write.

Holm: In a review of *Farnessity* in *A Gathering of the Tribes*, the reviewer says "Wordslabs are powerfully aural constructions that should also be read aloud." What opportunities have you had for oral presentations?

Silv: I think what the reviewer meant was that the reader should read them out loud so as to feel the rhythm and breath. Words always resonate differently when you hear them—and when you say them. Their action as sound fields is part of their physical presence. So much is missed if you don't experience that. While I'm working on a wordslab, I read it again and again, listening to how the current speeds or slows, melts, separates, stops or starts. It's a kind of choreography. My partner, a jazz musician and composer, reads them to me so that I can hear them from another perspective. The movement and tone of the voice directs where the beats land and how sounds bounce and twist.

Holm: The same reviewer says "Deliberately incongruous shifts in location, person, occasion, direction and sense drop the reader right between the lines into the spaces, moments and perplexities between and behind the words, in and out of the slips and tricks of language itself and into sensations of being 'there' minus the protective filters of categorization." As an experimental writer, have you encountered resistance from those who depend on traditional categorization?

Silv: Sure. There are plenty of roadblocks. Obstacles. Labels. Shut doors. But it's that resistance that propels me forward. I've been working on a full-length collection of wordslabs, Nextness, that will be published this year.

I don't really see myself as a "poet" or an "experimental writer." I'm just writing wordslabs. If I think too much about structure, placing words in formulated sequences, I'll lose that organic spontaneity, that invisible connection that is at the core of how I write. When I submit work to publications, I always refer to them as wordslabs, even if I have to click the submission category "poetry." There are those editors who find them totally engaging, while others find them of no interest. As an editor, I totally get that.

Holm: What advice do you have for those who likewise wish to be innovative in their approaches to writing and art?

Silv: Just go for it!

Holm: Thank you, Randee, for answering these questions about your work.

Silv: Thanks for the invite.

<http://www.cutbankonline.org/interviews/>