



Like jumping into a fast game of Double Dutch, where four hands spin two ropes in exactly rhythmic synchrony, opening the covers of *Be Zany*, *Poised Harpists / Be Blue*, *Little Sparrows* induces a special kind of exhilaration. The result of an unusually close collaboration, *Be Zany* traces its start to a public reading during which painter Jane Hammond's attention was especially caught by poet Raphael Rubinstein's *SIX SEX*. A ribald tour of the cities of Europe, the poem is driven by sensuous appetite ("Lecher weaves erotic voyage across Europe," it begins), and governed by an almost absurdly rigorous constraint: there are six stanzas, each six lines long; each line is six words long, and each word has six letters.

SIX SEX's rollicking sensuality, its brimming profusion of images, and above all, its author's voluntary submission to arbitrary rules of composition all characterize Hammond's work as well. For over twenty years, she has worked with a more or less fixed repertoire of visual signs, all derived from printed matter. And Hammond is no stranger to poetry, having studied it in college, and having worked collaboratively with several poets in the past (most recently on a cycle of paintings prompted by titles John Ashbery wrote for that purpose). *Be Zany*, however, is the first book Hammond conceived and designed, and the intimacy it involved between poetry and visual art was new to her – and to Rubinstein as well.

Rubinstein's number-driven method in *SIX SEX* typifies a group of contemporary writers known collectively as Oulipo, who have devised a wide variety of similarly random, strictly applied procedures for composing both poetry and prose. When Hammond heard *SIX SEX*, Rubinstein had already written several other poems using the same basic formula, starting with an arch verse of one letter (that letter is "X"; the title: *AFTER THE DIVORCE: MEETING BY CHANCE IN THE PARK*). Two other poems in the series were chosen for *Be Zany*, one based on twos, the other on fours; accepting a formidable challenge, Rubinstein wrote a new poem, based on sequences of eight, to conclude the book.

CRISIS, the two-stanza poem of two-lettered word pairs, is an irreducibly concise study in ambivalent (that is, two-minded) selfhood: "To be/me is//to be/an 'if'," it reads in its entirety. To illustrate it, Hammond produced photographs of two big iridescent soap bubbles, each printed on clear film and tucked into its own vellum envelope. Evanescent but dark (the bubble medium was Joy liquid soap, water, and Karo syrup), emblematic of ephemerality and, as presented, decidedly archival, the paired but non-identical bubbles are tantalizingly elusive. Seen through their translucent envelopes, they promise the glitter of massive gems, but held outside, they tend to disappear into the complications of the background against which they're seen.

The next poem, a tetrahedron, is – guardedly – more extroverted. *DAY'S PATH* traces a diurnal arc from dawn to moonrise; the numerical confinement (words of four letters, lines of four words, etc.) results in a vocabulary and meter that are modest and regular without sounding clipped, and in which the measured splendor of noon's "eyes like fire" and dusk's "zany bats" comfortably emerge. For this poem, Hammond



created a stately frieze of silhouetted figures, cut-outs that are sandwiched inside a long sheet of accordion-folded Japanese paper and linked by a silky black cord that extends to a knotted pull-tab, like that of a window shade. As the imagery unfurls, it forms a kind of shadowy parade, the figures – a reptile, a bird, a butterfly, a boy – issuing forth with the same tempered fanfare as the day Rubinstein describes.

For *SIX SEX*, which follows, such propriety wouldn't serve. To accompany the "gently goaded virgin" of Vienna, the "filthy revels" of Prague and "tanned nymphs" of Cannes, Hammond assembled a small album of vintage postcards, one for each of the fifteen cities Rubinstein names (including – the result of foraging of which she is deservedly proud – Dieppe, Ankara, and Crimea as well as London and Berlin). Each postcard is slipped into a clear plastic sleeve and taped on one side to heavy black scrapbook-style paper. Slyly tucked away on the postcards' back sides, as in some Victorian collection of erotica, are saucy bits of collage, some of it hand-stamped and drawn on: here dainty pin-up girls and bathing beauties are variously assailed by a meaningfully placed shot gun, or piece of fruit, or family of impertinent frogs, and also by a phallus or two.

As the poem cycle progresses, the difficulty of complying with its rules increases; even a restriction to words of four or six letters precludes all articles, most conjunctions, and the great majority of little helping verbs and nouns that make ordinary language flow. The rule of eight pushes the form nearly to its limits: every word is a mouthful, every line a daunting feast. Rubinstein's solution, a poem called *ACTIVE OCTAVES*, is a survey of the world of music, evoked as a polytonal, omni-stylistic symphony of instruments and artists, tweeting bluejays and howling mandrills, where "Infinite sonorous caresses surround everyone." To accompany this rousing finale, Hammond created a collage of aptly boggling complexity and nearly comic scale. Neatly folded to fit inside a paper pocket, the collage opens, Hammond notes, like a road map, but it suggests even more strongly an endless series of scarves flowing out of a magician's sleeve. A kind of faux-trompe-l'oeil compendium that recalls the illusionism of 19th-century American painters William Harnett and John Peto – especially their renderings of ready-made collages: papers tacked to walls, to the backs of frames – Hammond's epic collage features sheet music and snapshots, coloring-book Japonisme and Mickey Mouse. But however anarchic the imagery may seem, it is a perfectly filial companion to Rubinstein's poem: every image, from Vermeer's demure lute player to an imperious Jimi Hendrix, matches a reference in *ACTIVE OCTAVES*.

It was central to Hammond's conception of *Be Zany* that each of the four artworks be altogether distinct. "The guiding factor in the book's design," she says, "was that each poem suggested something different." The insistence on variety within pattern led her to create an entirely unique, hand-collaged cover for each book in the edition. But other features of the design support the number-based regularity on which its text

is centered, including the brightly-colored folders introducing each of the four sections, the first of which has two round cut-outs, the next four, and so on; silk-covered slipcases also come in these four colors. A lifelong bibliophile, Hammond also seized this opportunity to play with some of the book form's signal variations: primer, scrapbook, travel guide, scientific text. Having read how-to books as (visual) poetry (her largely antiquarian book collection ranges from *Phrenology, A Practice Guide to Your Head to Grow Your Own Fruit*) and poetry as practical advice (as in the image prompts she solicited from John Ashbery), Hammond here gets to work with a very visual kind of writing itself based on the willful hypertrophy of poetry's practical aspects. And, strikingly, in *Be Zany* she departed from a compositional practice based largely on the space of theater to work instead within the more conceptual space of writing, with imagery disposed less like actors on a stage than like characters in a book, or a word.

Rubinstein, an art critic as well as a poet, finds Oulipo's reliance on rigid, arbitrary rules paradoxically liberating: "You wind up exploring places you would never go," he says; "the constraints force you to examine what you're working with much more closely." Hammond agrees, and notes as well that such constraints "complicate the question of intentionality." This (partial) shift of creative responsibility from artist or author to fixed rule characterizes tribal art-making, where convention and ritual prevail, and also Conceptualism and its descendants, where fixed ideas govern form. Hammond and Rubinstein both proceed from somewhere in the middle – from a kind of neo-medieval, quasi-Victorian realm of numerology and alchemy, seances and Ouija boards, where material things matter in a more than formal way even though their meanings aren't readily (or exhaustively) interpretable. To that world of lavishly seductive arcana, *Be Zany* serves as an irresistible enticement.

NANCY PRINCENTHAL

JANE HAMMOND is an artist who is represented in New York by Galerie Lelong. She recently had a one-person show at the Whitney Philip-Morris and currently has a travelling museum show organized by the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art. Her work is represented in the permanent collections of The Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum of American Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Walker Art Center, The Chicago Art Institute, The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and many other major museum collections.

RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN is a writer and art critic whose books include *The Basement of the Café Rilke* (Hard Press, 1997) and *Postcards from Alphaville* (Hard Press, 2000). Among his forthcoming publications are *Polychrome Profusion: Selected Art Criticism 1990-2002* (Hard Press) and *In Search of the Miraculous: 50 Episodes* (Granary Books).

