

[The Conversant](#)

Interview projects, talk poetics, embodied inquiry.

- [Masthead](#)

September 1, 2016

Caleb Beckwith with Suzanne Stein and Steve Benson



Steve Benson and Suzanne Stein

Caleb Beckwith: I'm tempted to jump right in with questions regarding the media used in your collaborative chat performances, conducted from 2011–2012 and archived on [Suzanne's blogspot site](#). But I'm wondering if you could first describe the project, either individually or together, for readers not already familiar. Personally, I didn't discover your archive until last year, when I very quickly read its entirety without what now seems like the very necessary dimension of duration, both in the individual pieces and across the arc of your extended project. We'll get to duration later, especially as it informs collaboration, but I'd be remiss if we didn't properly set the scene for readers at the outset of the drama that is this interview.

Suzanne Stein and Steve Benson: The performances were collaborative improvisations undertaken live, online, without any kind of rehearsal or premeditation as to subject, theme, composition, or execution. The chats, or dialogues, or shows, or plays, or performances, whatever we think we might want call them, were the rehearsal. In our introduction to the book, tentatively titled DO YOUR OWN DAMN LAUNDRY, which collates all thirty-six of the resulting texts, precisely as they unfolded live, we offer this about our regularly scheduled, not-so-planned performing: *We realized the resulting works might be understood by turns as confrontational, avoidant, competitive, provocative, philosophical, intimate, meaningless, narcissistically challenged, ethically inquiring, epistemologically conflictual, and ridiculous. They are an exercise in presence, attention, friendship, improvisation, poetry, craft, and speech.*

We'd meet once a week, typically, and at the same time each week, usually for half an hour, sometimes longer, and see what would happen between us. We were using a technology that allowed an audience to watch our text exchanges live, reading the text as it appeared, at the same time we did, or alternatively, to scroll through that evening's archive at some later time. The set time and day of the week was like sitcom scheduling, to Suzanne's mind: half an hour, once a week. For Steve, it was like scheduling exercise or meditation, which prepared for the ordeal, the startle, and the self-consciousness of it.

The result is not a suite of poems and not not a suite of poems. The result is not a suite of poems unless you say so. Each chat might stand alone but it does so within a truly long and rather unmanageable process work, an extended experiment, a dialogue repeatedly truncated and restored, a conflicted lyric, or an anti-epic epic. The whole talks to itself and others and evolves organically, subject to the constraints we set on method, as we muddle or sing or survive our way through it. The two of us do not hide, except repeatedly, and we do find one another out, diversely.

Caleb: We've established the aesthetic and social components of your chats, time for the technological. Why did you decide to collaborate via live Internet chats, rather than another media such as email or video conferencing? Which chat technology did you use for this project—Facebook, gchat, something else? And how, if it all, do you see the choice of *which* chat technology influencing the collaboration that followed? Was the tech component an active interpretent in the conceptualization of your project, or merely a convenience?

Steve: Well, chats are writing, but they can occur in real time, visually providing evidence of posts. Emails have more framing devices around each post and are separate rather than continuous in their appearance as they accumulate. Video conferencing is not text. Chats the way they work at this stage in internet development involve a certain degree of confusing and second-guessing and potentials for misunderstanding and reactivity and flatness and angularity that would give us plenty to work with, in addition to relating to one another, expressing ourselves, and wondering what in hell we were doing. However, we didn't figure these things out before we decided to do it. We began planning how to do it as soon as we thought of it and realized it would probably be fun to try.

Suzanne: As I remember it, we decided to use a live, viewable-by-audience-in-real-time chat technology so we could perform together in public even while living thousands of miles apart.

The question of which tech was purely utilitarian — which would do what we wanted it to do? We'd been writing to each other and wishing to collaborate but we didn't have a way to be in each other's company to perform. One afternoon, texting back and forth on our phones, it seemed if we could just do some version of that live online, and this would be a solution to the long-distance problem. We used "CoverItLive", which—does anyone use it anymore?—is an embeddable platform that allows two or more people to broadcast a typed conversation while an audience of anyone with a link to the page could read/watch. (Or interact, if we had set the channel for that.) So, unlike gchat or Facebook Messenger, which I understand as private between conversees, anyone could be watching our improvisation unfold. Our collaboration was intended as live performance in front of an audience from the start. Our chats were not private to ourselves, they always had an audience. Though admittedly on some evenings our crowd was rather small. CoverItLive would tell us how many people were watching us perform at any given moment.

As Steve said [in an earlier version of this conversation], he had turned something like talking to himself into a public performance, and I had turned trying to talk directly to or with an audience, while under the influence of intense stage fright, into another kind of public performance. We really liked each other's results, and maybe we also each share elements of each. And maybe neither of us had met another person who wanted to work in quite a similar way as we did. Steve, does that sound true to you? Also, do you think it's true that you're free and I'm anxious? You're speaking freely and I'm speaking anxiously?

Steve: I am usually somewhere between worried and intensely apprehensive-with-death-wish when it's time to perform live and in person, even if I'm only reading a sheaf of so-called poems, but certainly if I'm improvising. Sometimes certain sorts of cloistering, rituals, or meditation ease the hour before starting to say (or write onto a visible screen) I don't yet know what. And it more or less extends through the performance, though the experience of being-with-others in that space/activity sometimes eases and always alters it, as does the tilt or tone or relative supposed excellence of my production. I'm not speaking freely, at all, it's under duress; it's just not scripted.

I agree with your remark, Suzanne, about my never meeting anyone else who might likely be willing to do this with me. I also have a sense that the idea of doing it pretty much occurred to us both, just then, spontaneously, as we were texting (I remember I was parked outside the public library in Blue Hill), though I suspect you were the one to mention it. I just realized I could look back at where I'd saved our first cell phone texts and turned them into a Word doc. We only began texting at all on April 9, 2011, maybe because you'd just acquired a phone that did it — or I had. A first exchange of 6 sendings ended with your post that you'd like to try a collaboration between your texting me or sending me posts and my phoning you. The next day you thought of using Facebook and getting an audio plug-in onto your blog. It's so funny now that I made no direct response at all. I suspect I was waiting to see if you really meant it, and if a plan we'd both feel good about would gel. We didn't text more about it but just a month later we began doing live chats as performance.

Anyway, while we were doing the chats, the audience was indefinitely present, and not in evidence, so I would get nervous only about *your* potential response, whether tacit or expressive,

to whatever *I* might say or do, and this could happen before and after each time I typed and posted (but somehow not so much *while* I typed and posted). This anxiety could be terrible at times and had to be worked with, generally, too. Ironically, the impetus to do this was not so much that we knew it was a terrific way to make an artistic statement or innovation but because it seemed almost nuts, certainly quixotic, and almost inevitably a gas, as we first conceived of it as a thing to do together. Right?

Suzanne: It seemed ridiculous, dumb, and embarrassing but then it was so liberating and so fun. I was incredibly anxious and worked up about the first performance. After that the feelings changed time to time and minute to minute.

Caleb: The part of your origin story that most interests me is the way that private text-messages became a public chat. What happened after your text messages were reframed as a potential artistic collaboration? Did the conversation change after you realized this plan to shift the dialog to a public arena?

You both mention nervousness—a subject with which I’m especially familiar when it comes to artistic performance. I wonder how performative affects like nervousness shaped the body of your performance as it shifted into the public sphere. In other words, is there a performative persona that gets triggered for you each independently—not to mention collectively? And how might these affects/personas be linked to your previous independent performances?

Steve: Talking to myself is something I do all the time, not just when performing. Ditto dealing with anxiety. I could imagine personae but I didn’t and don’t notice any. The texting we did was very seldom, up to the first live chat, and looks relaxed and exploratory, similar to the texture of the chats, and we seemed easily accepting of one another, unworried.

Both when texting each other and when writing the chats, we both seemed to try to act in ways that might at the moment be authentic, both as gestures or moves within a largely unforeseeable art activity and also as moments of coming through for one another without being untrue to ourselves—most all of this was, however, implicit and unmentioned as we went along.

We wanted and tried to make these chats truly interactive conversations, as one might if Facebook messaging for a half hour or more, for instance, while also identifying them consciously (okay, self-consciously, but also in a mutually shared intention) as art works, acknowledging as we might all the potential challenges and problems that both of these projects might entail.

Publicity, for this project, seemed and still seems like framing. It frames a practice that is at once an actual first draft of a creative work in progress, one with undetermined criteria for evaluation (other than hanging in there to adhere to a few basic rules) and also an episode in actual informal communication.

We wanted a little publicity out there to let people know we were doing live improvised on-line chats in public. No further claim or magnification was involved, so far as I can remember. Our intention to do this seemed to me enough to draw attention to. I had no assumption that many

people would actually attend to the live performances, but I did feel people could have some special experience if they did, especially if they weren't trying to do anything else at the same time.

Maybe you will have more, Suzanne, to say—maybe you will see Caleb's question differently than I do. I am curious.

Suzanne: That's an interesting question, Caleb, about performance personae. I think it would be true to say, about my own experience, that those chats, the time of our chatting, was for me so much about trying to be absolutely present to whatever was happening in the moment, that they allowed me to become no personae at all, or less personae, performative or other, than I would normally be in any other kind of public life. I do remember that on some occasions one or the other of us would adopt some kind of approach or personality/persona for the duration of a particular chat. Usually with the result of annoying the shit out of the other person. Or often. But, in opposition to the freedom of non-persona, was the anxiety, in which state it is very difficult to remain present, and all expressions could seem to me forced or put-on. The very first chat I was extremely nervous and anxious, and so the least present, though looking at it now, still I was following the moment as best I could. I remember feeling angry with Steve for sending out a big email blast before the event, which resulted in the announcement of our first performance on Harriet, as I'd wanted to try it all out more on the down low at the start, to see what it was, before showing our mess in public. I mean, we never rehearsed! In the end though, we had a large audience for that first chat, and that gave me some excitement and anxiety to continue. To "get better". The awareness of a public seemed to make me want to double down on the possibilities. The chats as a whole suite maybe describe a working practice from woodshed to stage.

Were our personal chatting tendencies much altered once public? Well, these were different ideas—it wasn't that we wanted to simply make our conversations public, I'm not vain enough to think that any ol thing that drops out of my mouth/pen is worth an airing. I thought of it entirely as performance, less as "chat"—whatever that means, and even though "chat", dialogue, and intersubjective, interactive responsivity, was certainly the ground of the performances. For me, it was always a walking onstage, but then to have dropped all stage once there. Steve and I often had a difference in opinion about what or why we were doing and this occasionally or often becomes a battleground in the performances themselves. Steve is all "Hey Suzanne what's up" and I'm all "fuck, Steve, again with the chattiness??" On the other hand, there is one chat that was arduously copied out in real time during the live performance hour from a series of text-messages we'd exchanged earlier that day. I think it is not possible for an audience to tell that this is what is going on, until a tell, or reveal, that comes toward the very end of the chat. And so what is the difference between the private and public dialogues? It might be more true that, rather than our text-dialogues pre-performances informing how the performances went, our performances more completely revised our private communications.

Caleb: I appreciate you both testifying to the different modes of performance you employ, and I'm wondering if we might explore the way that these differences manifest in your collaborations. Suzanne, you allude to a tension between your and Steve's performative attitudes when you describe how, though a character/schtick can help get one into the groove of a

performance, it can also throw a collaboration off the rails by annoying the shit out of one's collaborator. Without delving too deeply about my own practice, I'll say that this is a balance I continue to struggle with, in both collaborative and solo performance.

It sounds like you both seek something that we might call "authenticity," but that you come at it from different directions. I hear Steve describe how he seeks to bring the everyday into performance, while it sounds like Suzanne begins with performativity ("stepping onstage"), only to calibrate that impulse in dialogue. Though you seem to agree on the "authentic" space of the performance, I can't help but sense a creative tension between the differing affects relied upon to carry you each into a performative headspace. How do you navigate the tension between your different understandings of performance, and how, if at all, do you see this methodological tension shaping your collaboration?

Steve: A tension between our different understandings of what we are up to certainly is one key one might use to get into ways the dialogues' inherent drama (rather than any personae-driven drama) plays out, both within any given chat and also over the course of all 36 of them. Such tension! Speaking for myself, and presuming Suzanne might have felt something like this, I experienced my own tension entering and sustaining any one performance individually; I felt at times like I had some sense of tensions and moods getting embodied and experienced through an *us*; and then, inferring my affectively driven interpretations into Suzanne's posts, I supposed myself sensing *her* qualities of tension. But I also felt I might be radically misinterpreting them.

In fact, our agreement at times not to palaver between times about the chats could keep me hanging in grueling, irresolvable states of suspense as to what she was feeling, bugged by, hoping for, sensing in me and our project. This may have been the toughest part of the work to live with, particularly since it did carry over into what I would call real life, although the chats themselves were also real life. The chats did often feel hyper-real, though. Why? Generally, with experience, we realized ways to be engaged in a process that was, to us, authentically dialogical without being a conversation we would otherwise have found ourselves having, as every specific became marked by its being at once an element of the performance of an as yet unestablished art form while also a communication across the unknown to the more or less knowable, *other person*.

When I might open a performance by asking, "Hey, Suzanne, what's up?" I'm sure I was both highlighting the sense this wasn't just an ordinary conversation and also trying to make myself (and possibly her) more comfortable by climbing onto the moving bus by way of a secure, rubberized step up to the carooming vehicle itself. Like as not, I would find the bus hit a massive bump or took a sudden turn, just then.

I think for me such an opening suggested the license to say or do whatever we would on impulse of the moment, however naively, bring into the chats. It may have helped them to discover their range, but it also seemed to instigate many difficulties. So I had to learn to listen, to slow down, to wonder in a variety of ways, often without apparently responding. To discover something more than the noses flitting across my own face.

Suzanne: I agree very much with what Steve says here, that this tension between our different understandings of what we're doing there—at any given moment, or not—would certainly be one key to understanding the drama of what unfolds, in any one chat or in the whole sweep of the 36. Gosh they did feel hyper-real. Perhaps that's what happened. The hyper-real transformed the everyday communication, what I meant when I said above that the public chats totally reformed the private ones. Too, contrary to our annoyances with one another occluding anything in the collaboration, Caleb, I think the ground of our continual tension and our mutual willingness to stick with it through frustration and repeatedly for nearly two years is foundational to what then unfolds. This friendship transfigured or becoming in public performance. The place where what is real or "authentic" is simply what's left in the transcript. Or perhaps the place where Steve and I meet is simply "willingness"—we are both willing in each of our separate works and endeavors as poets and people, and together we could willingly meet one another, through occlusion, through tension, through anxiety, impatience, silliness, aggrandizement, to be sure in the pursuit of the performance, in making something, in discovery "at any cost" (?). Well, our friendship never seemed like it was going to actually entirely break down I don't think at any time during this period but we had many disagreements and probably sometimes felt that way.

Steve: The total duration of our 36 episode performance period is actually only a year and a quarter: May 9 2011 to August 10 2012. It seemed much, much longer to me, partly due to the intensity of the experiences and waiting for the next occasion lined up, and partly due to the shifts in continuity and tensions during two periods when we decided simply to suspend work until a later point. Most of the episodes were, otherwise, either a week apart or, for the last ten, a day apart. It was both a long haul project and a fast-paced one. I fully agree with what you say, Suzanne, about our mutual *willingness* as a factor in tolerating and risking the tensions involved in this work (this play), and I would be inclined to add, unless you disagree, our *stubbornness*—each of us seems unwilling, in a sense, to compromise, in our process, on our own willingness. We may share a stubborn willingness.

Suzanne: And maybe well-matched in stubbornness and willingness: I don't think either of us overpowers the other. Though it does seem at times like each is trying.

Caleb: Speaking of, Suzanne, in Live Chat 18, you respond to Steve's opening "hi" by asking "Why must you so often begin as though proposing a casual conversation? Thus insisting really one of two responses: a] I go along for the ride b] I behave contrarily." Would this question be a good point to open our general discussion of the tension structuring your performance into specificity—if not also my earlier question regarding the different roles you perform when chatting together?

There are 36 chats to deal with—many of which open with questions/statements from Suzanne—so I don't want to attach an exaggerated significance to any single text segment. However, Suzanne's description of a reactive binary seems like it might be a productive place to interrogate the larger poetics of your collaboration. Suzanne, was your role in the chats typically restricted to an a/b format (a choice of two characters)? And Steve, did you ever find your participation similarly delimited by Suzanne's statements? Something tells me that a collaboration driven by "well-matched stubbornness" might be rich with these moments, even if they're not always as explicit as the passage I identify.

Suzanne: Caleb, I'm really enjoying your questions. This one made me laugh a lot. Without looking back at it, I think I can say that Chat 18 was a point at which I'd reached almost maximum exasperation with Steve. There's the old improv principle, "yes, and," where you take your partner's bid and run with it no matter what. Well, first of all, I'd never had any improv training at the time of our chats, though I have had now, so I didn't have that as dictum in my mind; still and yet, I was regularly frustrated by what I saw as Steve's refusal to play *with* in service of his playing *for*. For the audience, instead of with me. Perhaps I was jealous.

I wonder if this is what our fundamental difference was? I was very interested in what could unfold between us in public, in language, live writing as private as poet at desk, two poets at desk, and I liked the *pressure* of the audience more than the *fact* of the audience. I should also say that I don't know that my complaints about Steve were "true" at the time, but there was something operating in the dynamic thus. Or, Steve has made a lifelong practice of talking to himself in public, and I was offended when that happened in our collaborations. I am constantly asking him in some way or another to pay attention to me or to what is going on between us. And, conversely, of course, Steve *is* one of the most attentive friends and collaborators and co-thinkers one could possibly have. He is so utterly delightful and playful and joyful, so interested in everything, so curious. But so often onstage I felt the bid was to for me to dance around whatever his play for the moment was. I wanted to face Steve, and I was frustrated when I felt he wanted to face the audience. We talked regularly off-screen about narcissism, his or mine; if I accused him of narcissism, and I did, well, I am reactive and found plenty of opportunity to flounce offstage in a fit. But our willingness (and love for each other and our deep and total commitment to the project) meant we regularly found ways to circumvent the reactive and natural binary without reducing our play to a kind of arms-linked song & dance, broad stiff smiles gleaming. Though there are occasional moments of that too.

To better answer your question, if I often felt I had option a] *play along*, or option b] *refuse*, still that didn't propose anything about "character" or identity one could inhabit. Those were infinite like they are in life. I'm kind of flummoxed with regard to your questions about role, character, etc. I would say that no roles or characters or anything else was "typical" of the chats; though definitely over time dynamics and personalities emerge and converge, as we each tried to arrive without predestination and to begin fresh precisely when the clock ticked the hour; what I think remained true throughout all 36 chats was that anything could happen.

We have both talked about our embarrassment over certain of the chats, where elements of each of our personalities are revealed, things we'd each prefer not to have seen about ourselves or have revealed to a public, but there these things are. Again with the willingness to expose ourselves, to be a fool.

Steve: Yes, that kind of willing seems true of me in my writing, performing, playing in public, anytime it happens, and yet perhaps especially here, perhaps because we both were so! Meanwhile, the challenges of connecting and reciprocating with loving justice and aesthetic interest lowered the limbo bar and I, at least, felt more in limbo than usual, while at the same time making my own best effort to define and realize responsibility to you, Suzanne, as a particular other, the primary other.

My conditioning, as you note, has privileged the audience as the other whom I play with and to, through about four decades. In other live in-person collaborations, I'd say two or more of us presented toward the audience, in concert, so the different double focus here added difficulty, felt complex, multi-edged, to me. I wanted and needed to know and relate to what you were doing, seeking, asking, and I didn't know how to drop or reduce my attentiveness to the curious possibility of the third person's interest in each moment without jettisoning some kind of aesthetic imperative I may have felt beholden to.

This doesn't mean I feel I was "writing well," either. I think I was being a facetious asshole much of the time and an exasperated self-loathing tool occasionally. All in the interests of *trying* to write well and to relate authentically. You seemed to feel that connecting would be more easily done than I was finding it, and maybe others would have done it more easily than I. But I didn't regret a minute, finally, nor did I feel at all certain that you were ever "playing along" or even "refusing"—just what your intentions were and just what you were actually *doing* was often enigmatic and confusing to me. There always seemed more than one way to understand it. Maybe my ambiguous receptivity was a problem in connecting.

I still question how narcissistic I was being, or am. Although I see that I may be more solipsistic than some people, questioning myself as I go along, meanwhile, maybe our world is pretty well mired in a cultivation of narcissistic individualism that, as an American citizen, I know I have not expatriated from, despite my adherence to Zen Dharma and my fascination with collaboration. Like any two people who've shared a long, close, involved, co-responsible relationship, we will have really different accounts of what happened and what our own and one another's parts in that were—especially the rough parts, with which these chats are, happily, quite well freighted. To me, Suzanne, you *seemed* in many of the earlier chats simply not to get my willingness and effort, my invitations to learn how to play with you and my extra efforts to listen, except when you did, which seemed increasingly frequent and intriguing, to me.

Thus I *felt* you, at times, as stymied and rejecting, even as I was inviting, adjusting, and struggling to return to an unknown. My sort of struggle all too plainly played out, perhaps, so it may appear mostly performative, while I couldn't possibly parse how much it was "playing for the stalls" and how much it exposed an abject insecure demonstrative manner painfully familiar to myself when in a troubled moment of what I take to be closeness misconstrued and devalued. What's odd and wonderful, I believe to both of us, is how much resolution or dissolution of the obstacles and tensions we discovered in the final ten chats, which were based on a calculatedly more demanding and intensive plan than the first twenty-six had been.

Suzanne: We talked endlessly about narcissism, and I asked many questions about my own role in that dynamic and proclivity toward it. Though there was from the beginning another dynamic at play, which we have also discussed at different times in different ways: the power imbalance implicit in gender, and age, and, possibly, coupled with a power and visibility imbalance in a writing community. Steve's been making work for four decades; my decade and a half I assumed less well known to who I thought our reading public might be. However true or not this unequal valuation, my desire to be able to participate as a full collaborator and be seen as such, that we would arrive on equal terms to the stage, that we would face each other equally, each bringing our own skills and experiences to the fore and bending or forgiving to the other in order to

collaborate—that this would be the case was an anxiety of mine. And so I worked even harder to not be, as I felt I might be, subsumed into the Steve play, and surely that sometimes meant fighting back too hard. But it also meant that Steve needed to come along towards me as I held my ground. Neither of us could do our same old song and dance. We pushed and pressed each other equally I think.

On the subject of “writing well”, “good writing”—there is a lot of magnificent writing in our suite of chats, and a lot of really deplorably awful writing (often mine). In my own work I have regularly sacrificed “good writing” (whatever that is) in service of some other kind of exploration in language, in speech, in service of some sort of self-exposure. I have hurried rather than worried a text into being. I can’t really presume to know what a third person, an audience, might want or see or read or know or find in these chats—maybe that’s (my half of) our project’s failure. Except that regularly viewers would write to me or us after a performance and express their engagement and excitement—and those messages so often came just when I was thinking (in those awful low moments of self-critique) Ugh how narcissistic, how boring, how inward, how lacking in art our project. Except it doesn’t lack in art. We each bring to it long practice, long effort, long dedication, in both performance and in writing, and also in loving, and in reaching for friendship, and in various practices of presence (Steve’s in Zen, mine in yoga). These chats are active professions and performances and enactments of all of these things.

Caleb: Speaking of our various practices and presences, I think I should follow your example and interrogate my own proclivity towards narcissism as interviewer, offering my experience of reading your chats as an outside perspective from which you might both ultimately (collectively?) diverge. Suzanne, you’ll already be familiar with this narrative, as it concerns the rocky road I found myself upon during our first meeting.

Shortly after moving to the Bay Area, Suzanne and I met for lunch in a new-poet-in-the-area meet and greet. The conversation was so pleasant and refreshing that I soon found myself speaking more than a little too freely when the subject of these collaborative chats arose. Of course I can’t remember my exact phrasing, but I couldn’t help but rave about them, with part of me that’s still a grad student knee-deep in Language Writing saying something to the tune of: “they’re like Steve Benson doing *Steve Benson*—but with an interlocutor!”

At the time, I was only months removed from my actual life as a grad student/aspiring academic researching performance poetics in the 1970s and 80s, so I cut myself some slack for simply being more familiar with Steve’s work than yours, Suzanne. But as a poet who is both white and male, the past year and a half of poetry drama has taught me nothing if not self-skepticism when I find myself casting a woman writer as secondary to any male collaborator. Despite the mortification I continue to feel regarding this huge misstep—at best gauche, and at worst downright sexist—I still can’t disentangle my reading from the text itself.

What I have for you two, then, is really more of a request than a question. Will you help me unpack my above confession? How active a role do you assign your respective literary biographies in the reception of your collaborations? And how do you each deal with each other’s extant critical affiliations—including but not limited Suzanne’s position in the art world and Steve’s affiliation with Language Writing? I want to be careful not to reduce either of you to a

single line on a CV, but, at the same time, I do want to fully reckon with the ways that one's critical biography can all but determine the reception of his/her work. I don't want to exaggerate my representativeness as a reader here, but I also don't believe I'm totally alone in this particular misreading.

Suzanne: Your question speaks the answer to my fear for itself: though one part of the work I thought I had to do while in performance with Steve was holding my own against Steve doing Steve (and, I regret that we keep going down this path in this interview as our collaboration was profoundly interlocutional), I couldn't have known how truly my anxiety might be realized in an audience. When you and I met in SF, Caleb, I was dismayed (I was *angry*) to find that I had been right to worry about my possible disappearance—with some audiences anyway—when you volunteered my erasure by naming me as merely an interlocutor, perhaps only a foil, to Steve. But if one reads the text, really reads it, with the awareness of two people working together to discover, to interact, in language, it's simply not possible to see it the way you did. Or it is, and it doesn't matter. Steve is as much a whisper to Suzanne as Suzanne is a whisper to Steve.

To the CV: I am not my biography, despite the contemporary moment's desperation for brand. It's important I feel to say here again that there is an object, a trace in literature, *an artwork*, which is the text that comprises the record of our collaboration and performance, and readers can explore for themselves what occurs there. Between two humans, two psychologies, many feelings, many identities. There is the "transcript" or the text which resulted from each of our weekly collaborations in live writing performance, each one still archived precisely as it happened on my (ancient) blog, and the collection of the transcripts we've collated (cleaned up but left entirely unedited) into a manuscript. Steve perhaps will have other, differently nuanced ways of answering this question.

Steve: The problems raised are thorny, I suppose. The text is a dialogue between two human entities wondering how to do whatever they will do in speaking/writing, without established identities other than whatever appears to the reader, as an auxiliary interlocutor (hence an active participant), through the verbal experiences recorded in the text. In the book version, our names no longer appear next to each speech, as they did in the on-line scrolling edition; instead we simply used italicization to distinguish one speaker from the other, intending to privilege neither.

My ideal reader has never heard of either of us before and is occasionally wondering whether reading this text will lead to knowing either or both of us, or not, but is not particularly concerned about getting to know the authors so much as contemplating and reflecting on how the text works itself through that reader's own consciousness. The ideal reader for this work, to my mind, is an audience of one, but I admit that I've always wondered too what a little party might be like, following it live on line, quaffing beers, chewing chips, and commenting all sorts of ways.

I felt pinned to the wall occasionally, like a dead moth, when it seemed I was caught with my pants down, doing shtick, as it were, that might be Steve Benson's easy or peculiar way of coping with the challenges of honestly collaborating. I couldn't always tell, and I don't think any of us really can, when this was and wasn't a behavioral problem on my part; clearly, it can be an issue for a reader, including a collaborator. The problems would come up for the reader if this

led to a *reductive* reading of the text, in terms of celebrity, recognizability, generational or gender or other differences, et cetera.

Shtick has its treacherous side and can threaten me in any verbal work, and I am generally watchful and try to avoid it. However, it can come to seem like every possible utterance reflects well-worn grooves of speech in me or can be seen by others as conventional to language writing, Benson performance, psychotherapy intervention, or other seemingly limited modalities. When someone brings this to my attention critically, I can feel erased, misunderstood, or unfortunately less than conscientious in my efforts to respond genuinely in good faith to the occasion for speaking. In the context of a collaboration like this, such charges can be even more threatening, as they may precipitate both myself and my partner in writing or performance into a messed-up state of self-consciousness, and therefore also, probably, the work we are doing.

I suspect too it's maybe harder to be not in persona, or not performing shtick, in one's 60s, especially perhaps as a white male in the USA, with all the privilege entailed, however marginally published and employed, having been going at it in the ways I have for 40+ years already. I mean, anything I do might still be very visibly a "performance" of my "thing," perhaps all the more when set off against someone else's less familiar and established articulation of intentions and attestations.

Meanwhile, though I've been writing a long time and sometimes performing or publishing, I don't feel well-known. This may seem ingenuous to Suzanne and others. Nevertheless, I am usually surprised when I find that my work or way of working are familiar to someone I've never met—or even someone I no longer remember meeting. And I am reluctant to build any new work on the basis of having established a reputation or set of achievements, since each new work seems to me a totally new challenge, including the imperative not simply to repeat something already more or less accomplished. As we undertook this project, I thought more often of people who know Suzanne and her work better than people who know me or my work better as potential readers of the live chats, and this was exciting to me. Naive? I have no idea. It interested me.

Caleb: Naive or not, it interests me as well. I hesitate to say this because of the negative connotations so often associated with the word, but I find the naiveté of these chats to be one of their most moving aspects. That's to say that it's both rare and refreshing to encounter a collaboration that wishes to be nothing more than, in Suzanne's terms, two people—not personas, brands, movements, or any other reification of your practice. Rather, as Steve described, simply two people "act[ing] in ways that might at the moment be authentic . . . coming through for one another without being untrue to [your]selves."

I like that gesture in the context of an interview because it allows me to conclude by asking about friendship. To both my satisfaction and chagrin, I've recently reached a point in my life as a writer where I can no longer separate the work I produce from the friends and colleagues with and for whom I create it. Not only do the piece and its reception now seem part and parcel, but so too the party and the poem. Despite this fact, and unlike your chats, so many of the poems I encounter continue to disavow their hard sociality in favor of some fantasy—be it a contained lyric subject, overarching political/philosophical system, precious appeals to coterie, or some mixture containing all three.

Given that you are both so deeply invested in mining inconvenient affects as part of your work, I wonder if you might now address your place—or lack thereof—in a contemporary poetry setting. I want to hear how you navigate the sphere I just described without compromising your respective aesthetics of authenticity and knowing naiveté? Is it as simple by finding respite in friends and allies like one another?

Suzanne: Caleb, I'm not sure why it has taken me so long to answer your question. Weeks, even. Perhaps because my relationship to the coterie, and coterie poetics, is now and has been for the last several years quite fraught. The questions you raise here irritate me, in the sense of feeling emotionally roughed up, riled, for thinking on them and the picture you describe. Poems and performances are for audiences and readers, for others, but the question of which others is perpetual. For a long time, being deeply embedded in a Bay Area poetry community as I was (as I am?), I would often say “we can't read each other”; feeling that the way we knew each other—poem and party indistinguishable—made it too hard to see the text/art/work in any “objective” way. Objectivity is a ruse of course. And so is pure subjectivity. I suppose over the last few years coterie has felt oppressive to me—there are clear aesthetic and ideological demands for poetry within (any) coterie, most certainly currently in Oakland coterie, and I began to feel those demands suffocating my ability to gain access to my own work. No “one” is responsible for these demands I perceive; I think many would agree with me that they are there. But I am constructed in relation, no matter my love of isolation. So much, most of, my work has been constructed in relation, in response, in conversation. Yet I am naturally defensive; I would like to be cultivating my friendliness.

Steve has shown me great friendliness—something different than friendship—over the course of our relationship and collaboration. Everything seems possible to me within the exploration of both of those things. I say “shown”, meaning he gave it to me and showed me what friendliness was or could be. Through the tension there was freedom to play, we were serious, we were loving, we looked outward and inward, towards and away from each other. But we cared a lot about our work and each other. Tenacity in caring is such difficult work; tenacity despite disagreement, and the emotions that attend it—aggravation, rage, frustration. Tenacity in caring seems to me an ultimate friendliness, one coterie so often seems to lack. Coterie is necessary, but is defensive, limits its connections, falls out. Like many, I have been guilty of unfriendliness. I've been trying to learn what friendliness is and how to receive and extend it. This is my best guess, for now, at an answer to your complex question.

Steve: I find the question complexly interesting, and Suzanne's answer vital and meaningful. My own distance since 1992 from a virtually domestic poetry scene in the Bay Area that had engaged, nurtured, stimulated, and compelled my learning and responsibility most all the time for 16 years is a remarkable factor in the co-construction of this set of performances. The scene I have been almost entirely absent from for the past 24 years (a much longer period than the aforementioned 16) puts me in an unquestionably and yet enigmatically different position relative to community engagement, reception, and response. And we recognize my membership in at least a half-generation precedent constellation of poet-friends also shifts the locus of writerly attention to social interplay around any writing task, but especially this one. I delight, personally, in the overlap of these communities, as many of my generational compatriots are still present and active in the Bay Area writing communities, with no consistent agenda I know about

for group connectivity with writers who only “appeared” after I had left town. *Who are we?* Such fundamental questions (which pepper and punctuate our chat dialogues, even as they animate and frustrate them at times) are aroused, for me, as I consider, with an amused and disorganizing dismay, the prospect of clarifying and analyzing the dynamics of such relations.

While, living in an urban locale with a lively, contentious, loving, alienating complexity of inter-poet activity, I found my work prompted by the hope it would prompt others to react or respond or shift somehow in their practices—at least I felt this, even if I had no specific designs or intentions for others’ behaviors or writings. If I can construe anything, it may be that I wanted to provoke difference and expansion of possibilities. And I wanted listeners and readers to feel the sincere conscientiousness and sober contortions of ethical responsibility and privileges of hilarity and startled laughter in the writing and performing that I got to do there. Living away from other writers I find those embracing and bracing kinds of connection with, I find I make my own context more, and this leads to a more contemplative, wondering-aloud kind of work process and outcome. I don’t know how obvious this difference and its social conditioning is to others, and my own construction of the comparison may be inaccurate.

But, or so, working through these dialogues in performance time with Suzanne has been an exciting *éblouissement* of the interface of being with and being without the socius that hold after-parties and negotiate publication possibilities between sips and bites, jokes and jabs. Live, on-line, pre-announced publication of the work *as it was written (performed)* supported, in me, the fantasy that we were part of something somewhat larger, at the moment, itself an unidentifiable fraction and function of a more expansive and diversely interactive community life with poetics (however construed) as its common language. Without meaning to more than at any other time, I found the qualities I just referenced of “the sincere conscientiousness and sober contortions of ethical responsibility and privileges of hilarity and startled laughter” appeared privileged in my sense of how we were following through on our plain intention to perform umpteen plus improvised chats on line.

Meanwhile, I categorically agree with Suzanne’s forwarding the primacy of the ethics of friendliness, which include tenacity, to be sure, as a foundation to any successes we have achieved in these chats, in this project, as well as key to the eventual value of any failures that may lie within them. There is not a lot of meta-talk about the process or project, within the chats, nor about friendship or how we experience it with each other—or with anyone, I’d say. We appear more like two avatars struggling to recognize their realities, largely through their challenges and engagements of and by one another. Even so, we come up against the reality of our exchanges, in real time, within the chats, as our actual utterances, the displacements as evidence of our actual listening, and the project is plainly premised not only on having been friends but also on questioning how we are friends and how to learn more from that investment of care, energy, and attention. Trouble occurs in any friendship, and the perils of frustration and conflict, misunderstanding and disappointment, are inevitable in any protracted engagement of its sociality. We didn’t have to intend including them in these chat (nor did we really *want* them there), but only to proscribe ruling them out.

The rest of our social determinants appear metaphorically and virtually, without a reckoning to bring them into play within the chats—and to do so might violate an implicit ethical imperative

we felt and contemplated but only partly put into words to one another when we pledged to avoid the risk of hurting others' feelings through this work. The coterie, the other friend, the romantic partner, the budding disciple, the fellow writer had no standing to respond and intervene in this work. Therefore, I suspect, we would not find it valid to attempt, in disguised or explicit ways, to address them or to characterize their influence or interactions within the work. We were the ones on the line, and so we may appear within the chats especially (and perhaps equivalently) isolated and alone, seeking one another, studying and learning the grounds for and practice of friendship.

Suzanne Stein is a poet, writer, and performer. Her work is often site- and context-specific, collaborative, anxious, and interactive, joining examinations of visual and performance arts with lyric and somatic exploration. Recent publications and performance documents include [The Kim Game](#) (Area Sneaks), [TOUT VA BIEN](#) (Displaced Press), and *Passenger Ship* (Ypolita). Poems, talk performances, and prose have appeared in *War and Peace, On: Contemporary Practice, Counterpath*; and at New Langton Arts, the Poetry Project, the Berkeley Art Museum, and elsewhere; audio performances are archived at [PennSound](#). Other texts in the live, performative, and conceptual vein include *Three-Way* (2nd Floor Projects, 2009), *HOLE IN SPACE* (Omg, 2009), and *Orphée* (Minor/American, 2007). Suzanne is also the founding editor of SFMOMA's digital art and literature publication *Open Space*; in her tenure as editor-in-chief (2008-2016) she presented the work and thinking of hundreds of writers, artists, musicians, filmmakers, critics, curators, and others, in venues digital, print, and real.

Steve Benson has lived in downeast Maine since 1996, where he has been co-parenting two offspring and working as a psychotherapist. He shares links to creative work on line through [stevebensons.com](#) and last spring performed a major project of nearly daily posts called *Page One*, which remains archived at [annexpress.org](#). His most recent books are *Open Clothes* (Atelos, 2005) and the co-authored *Grand Piano* series of autobiographical essays (Mode A, 2006-10). A chapbook of more recent work appeared this year from Essay EP. It can be found on line at <http://www.essaypress.org/ep-49/>.

Written by [Editor1](#) Posted in [September 2016](#) Tagged with [Steve Benson](#), [Suzanne Stein](#)