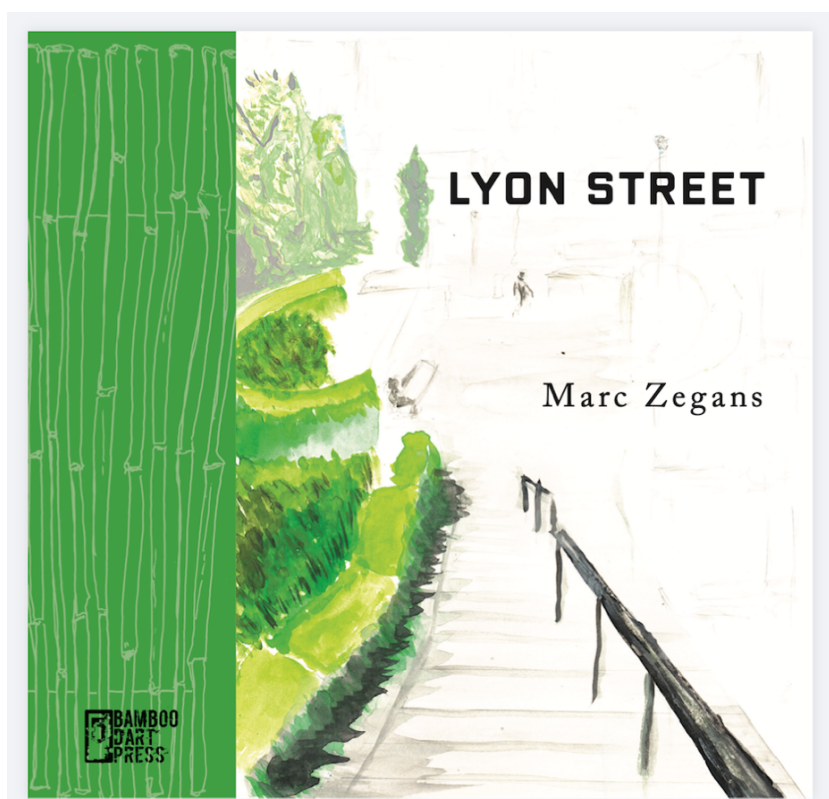


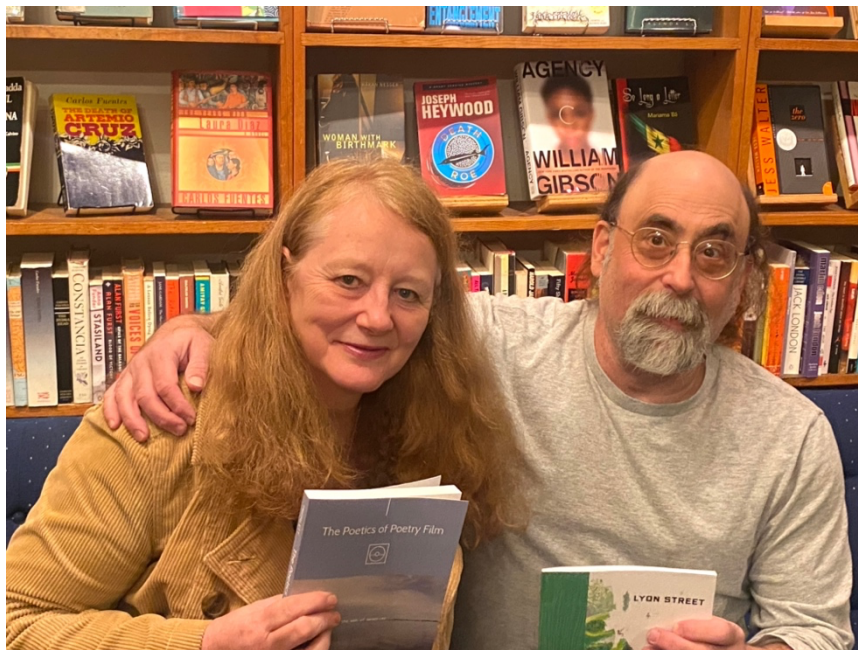
## **Motherland – a San Francisco State of Mind** ***Lyon Street* by Marc Zegans (shadowed by Herman Berlandt)**

a roving reader's report by Sarah Tremlett

A year ago this month saw the publication of American poet Marc Zegans' milestone work – *Lyon Street* – an elegy to a city, and memories of times past, still burning deep. Early in November 2022, I was key speaker and an exhibitor at Tom Konvyes' *Poets with a Video Camera* exhibition, whilst also taking part in a reading at Co-Op Books, Vancouver. As part of a mini tour, I then flew to the fabled artists' oasis of San Francisco. Here, I joined up with Marc at the legendary Adobe Books in the Mission for not only a reading from both *Lyon Street* and my slowly growing family history collection *Tree*, but also to present *The Poetics of Poetry Film*, and share poetry films and their historic connection to San Francisco.



What better place to present than a bookshop known affectionately as 'The Living Room of the Mission' (literally!) where artists and writers have been so at home since its inception by 'bohemian eccentric' Andrew McKinley in 1989. Before I continue, I would like to take this opportunity to once again thank Prasant Nukalapatii, Literary Events Co-Ordinator at the bookshop for hosting us so warmly, (continuing its historic tradition) and providing a memorable event. You may ask why I am writing belatedly about this now. The months that have elapsed since I returned to the UK have unfortunately been filled with family issues and other pressing writing commitments. Now at last, this report and review is the first of two from the Northern Californian



shores: where in Part One I will expand on Marc's wonderful book (garnering stellar reviews) and its relationship with San Francisco (interwoven with my own trip) and in Part Two, a pilgrimage to Bolinas to meet a luminary in the field of experimental poetics.



Marc speaking and Prasant (just behind laptop).

Marc Zegans had an itinerant childhood, following his father's medical career. He moved from Michigan to Virginia then to London, followed by New Haven, Connecticut (his father taught at Yale) then back to England. Ultimately, he returned to San Francisco where he finished High School, then to University at Cornell, where he was named a college scholar. He then transferred to Haverford in Pennsylvania because he said he 'wanted to be in a small liberal arts environment'. [As a total aside, I lived for four years in nearby Wynnewood where my two girls were born, and I

would often walk with them in the surrounding grounds of Haverford College. I also exhibited all around the States with my paintings at that time, whilst writing scripts (one feature optioned and another stage play produced) whilst looking after very young children. Happy Days!] Zegans graduated from Haverford in 1983, ultimately going to Harvard Graduate School in Public Policy where he began writing poetry. With a health and family-related hiatus of around ten years he picked up writing poetry in the early 2000s, when as he says he ‘came out as a poet as his primary occupation’.

### **(W) Rites of Passage and the Collection as Neighbourhood**

*Lyon Street* is Marc’s seventh poetry collection, and, with well-honed experience, he digs deep into the achingly personal and the psycho-geographic. It is impossible to conceive of its germination in any other city – whilst paralleling the social, economic and cultural sea change that swept across the world from the late 1970s to the 90s and on. In many ways this publication wears its heart on its sleeve, an ardent dendrochronology cataloguing revealing rites of passage turning the boy into the man – ‘i tossed my heart in the gutter / down on Polk, by Suckers Liquors’ (‘If We Stay’). It is also one where he takes the role of mourner, for the city and also for the loss of times long gone, and the fallibility of the mind. In ‘North Beach’ we read ‘memory a paramour/ fadin’ in the mist’.

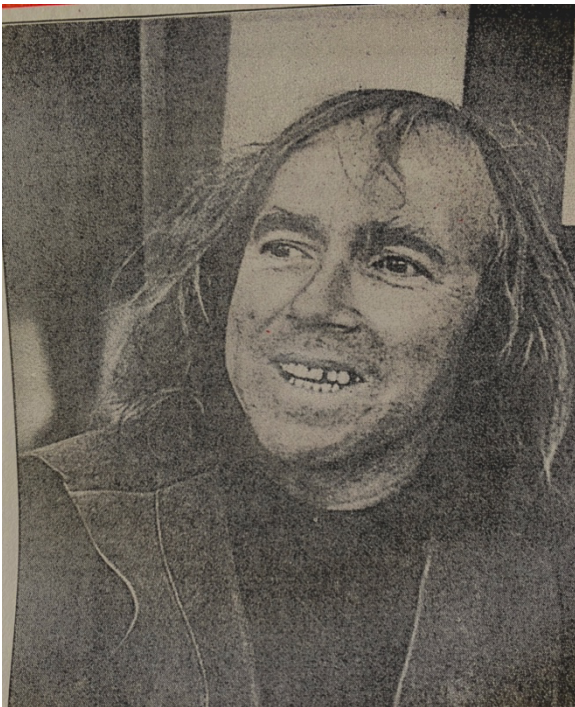
Although *Lyon Street’s* execution as an integrated artwork, analogous to a concept album, is distinctly original, it is difficult not to consider Marc following in the footsteps of earlier writers drawn to this city. He has mentioned that ‘P(un)k Poets Too Fucked to Drink’ is a direct answer to Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’; and in the same poem he also has a passage that refers directly to both William Carlos Williams and to Walt Whitman.

As a poetry filmmaker, flying out to San Francisco it is impossible not to anticipate both the historical charge of the Beats and Renaissance poets but also Herman Berlandt’s first poetry film festival in Bolinas in 1975. Here I would like share a brief background to the great man who put poetry film on the map. Herman Berlandt (1923–2017) lived and breathed poetry and was a signal force rising out of hippy West Coast San Francisco and Bolinas (a small artistic community on the coast in Marin County), which columnist Rick Polito says ‘he adopted as part of his character’. Born to an emigrant family of Polish descent, Berlandt was a poet and free spirit (often dancing or bursting into song with the joy of life) and a ‘gentle soul’ (Stephen Ratcliffe). He began selling poems on the streets in Berkeley (writing a poem a day) and with an extensive output is known for being philosophically in tune with the planet, for example publishing the *Mother Earth Journal*. However, he is most famous for founding the National Poetry Association in 1975 and accompanying Poetry-Film festival: a four-day event then held in the Mesa clubhouse. Cin(E)-poet George Aguilar became president of the NPA, and director of the annual poetry film festivals.

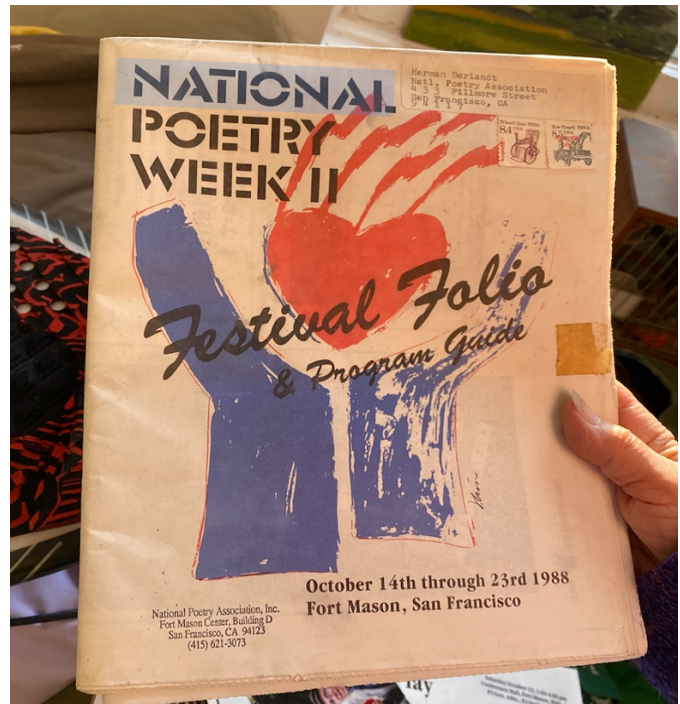
Like many forces of nature, Herman’s life appears like a continuous string of stories, where one event leads to the next. I briefly met the wonderful fine art photographer Ilka Hartmann during my trip and she gave me some of her collected papers on his work. She looked after him at the end of his life, saying he was ‘the heart of the party’, and you can’t help feeling that his spirit lives on



across the bay. And even though the consensus is that San Francisco is not what it was in terms of freedom of creative spirit (developers destroying neighbourhoods, rent hikes pushing artists out and software developers in etc.) the feeling of a percolating, richly creative site still lingers (evident through the open arms of many of the people I met).



Herman, around 1972 (images courtesy Ilka Hartmann).



## The Magic of Recall

Marc employs three main techniques in this perfectly formed and executed work: a temporal device where recall is transposed into immediate experience; the slippage between place and the artist's stages of life, and the slippage between the book itself and the urban cityscape.

Although looking back in time, we are placed firmly in the present tense. Here is the very moment of experience as it happens, generating a direct, imagistic vision: but invisibly steered by the magic of recall. His gathering eye sweeps a room, and all its textures and registers: those small details – the 'Stone jeans'. And like a metaphoric mirror, a particular *location* operates as a wistful device, where unwanted change is about to happen (accelerated in our imaginations by the surview of hindsight), whilst also standing as an incubator, a stimulus for stages in the artist's own life. From the very first page of this signal collection of poems there is a sense of Marc's very particular presence within the text. This might seem obvious for a poet, but I mean his presence seems somehow left in the text, almost as if he has abandoned himself there, (in that time recorded, and also on the page), and now is retuning to resurrect the person he was, returning decades later. As we feel the woolly warmth of nostalgia, of the tentative echoes of belonging, we also move forward with different impulses and intensities of desire. Marc recounts drink-fuelled encounters that fall short or, at the very least, are like so many that fade into oblivion, yet have somehow





been committed to Marc's memory. The living body, the flesh and blood and the shadow – the shadow of others imparting themselves.

### Book as Poem Map

One of the prime areas that strikes the reader is the conterminous nature of the design of the book – the poems, their titles and fonts – and the geography of the inception of the words, drawn down in each particular space. Of how a perambulation through San Francisco and an optical walk through the book might echo and resonate with each other (a map is also included that links directly to the table of locations). This is also emphasised by the Zen-like square format: as if an urban philosophy of mind has been captured in book form. There is a psycho-literary-geographic space in the placing of each poem, as if pages are avenues and words happened upon at a street corner. It turns out this is close to the truth:

Regarding the order of the poems, the experience I wanted to create for the reader was one of traveling about the city, turning at the corner from one street to another, each poem its own street and scene. This is why I included the map and table of locations at the beginning, each of which is a kind of poem in its own right, and most particularly why the titles of each poem are set in Fog City Gothic, a font that honours the type used on the black on white skinny rectangular street signs that were on every street corner during the time in which the book is set. The rectangular black lines that surround the titles further mimic the look of the street signs. So, you can view the journey through the poems as a kind of walkabout.



The expected

### **Motherland: the real thing**

In conjunction with these three main devices, for me what instantly stood out within the entire collection was the really strong sense of the influence of female forces (both women and also the city itself) on his life and his writing. When I asked Marc about this he said: ‘Your observation that the entire collection was driven by a female force is profoundly insightful. You really have this very well, and it’s not a point that any other reviewer has articulated.’ And so, I move forward with this salient point in mind.

Setting a geographic metaphor, San Francisco sits between the wild Pacific Ocean and its rolling, often treacherous currents and the peaceful, sheltering bay. The Golden Gate strait spans the channel between the two, a mouth permanently negotiating with sparkling Sausalito and Marin County. The city feels inviting, and without forcing a dualist lens, evokes in its geology a maternal feminine: an ample latitude in its rising and falling, which slows everything down and makes you stop and take in the suddenly arresting cerulean views. Perhaps, for some, this creates an underlying (literally) dramatic and constantly repressed tension (the potential for instant annihilation) with the San Andreas Fault deep below.

In many of the poems we are invited to discover how he finds himself with different female protagonists, at different phases in his life, through different lenses. Looking back to the boy, the young man etc. – the illusory allure of the bar whore, then the deep sense of mutual trust with the mother who would not paddle out into deep water. Here the first person and ‘You’ are still in dialogue, casting an intriguing question as to specific identities. In ‘Stone’ he begins ‘Her husband had walked out three weeks before. She wore a denim jacket and stone pants’... Or in ‘The Lower



... and the unexpected

Register', 'looking for a particular moment on a given night' 'she and I ran Ocean Beach waterline at 3AM'.

In his recreation of this particularly instinctive and heady moment I am reminded in some way of the exhilaration of Picasso's famous painting 'Two Women Running on the Beach' (1922). Equally, we discover how fertile encounters that happen by chance – two people at a bar – might play out very differently in different periods. Maybe looking back, it feels the world had more space for those seeking love as part of a beautiful, ongoing adventure; who needed it to be less planned, mortgaged, legally bound, harnessed to money. It could play out in a million directions. Today we have and are tied to insurance and mortgage love; one indistinguishable from the myth of ownership and 'authorised credit'. We are born leased. Our love is, well, locked in.

Whilst Marc has pared back his writing, crafting many drafts, I still hear the bass tones across the valley, the jazz rhythms that he has espoused more fervently elsewhere. It is not surprising to discover he played blues piano for many years. In the ebb and flow of his compositions you can catch the tensions and releases of early David Meltzer, and Lew Welch's loose musicalities (two of my favourite Beat poets). The very honesty of this book rings a clear bell. As he says: 'This book is composed as a love letter to the City and to the people who shaped the time in which I came of age. I wanted it to be as plain and open as possible. It is completely of the heart.' He even dedicates the book to the cafes where he sat and learned to write. When I asked Marc if the poems were chronological, he noted that whilst not exactly so, the poems do provide points along an emotional trajectory.



The poems follow an emotional logic, opening with a crack in the rigid lines around a closed and wounded heart with the scored pages of music falling from the stand, and ending with the opening to new possibility and adventure, this chapter in a life and the life of the city having now past.

As fate would have it, his own journey that began rough around the edges to be honed as the years passed, parallels the times that were suddenly changing so fast. This was, as he says before AIDS, and a city losing much of its bohemian character. Beginning with warm and loveable jazzed cafes and family diners, where voices are invited to just spill out and find themselves, the scenario soon changes to sly, sophisticated concept bars and designer coffees, and we feel him change with it. This collection constantly reminds us that poetry can flower from a fondness and affection for something, because in those places we find a faith in humanity, where we can thrive and grow.

The first poem introduces 'Jay' sitting alone before a music stand in an empty room 'high above the plunging hill', the moment before he might pick up his saxophone,

the 'curling sheets of noted

lines

falling.'

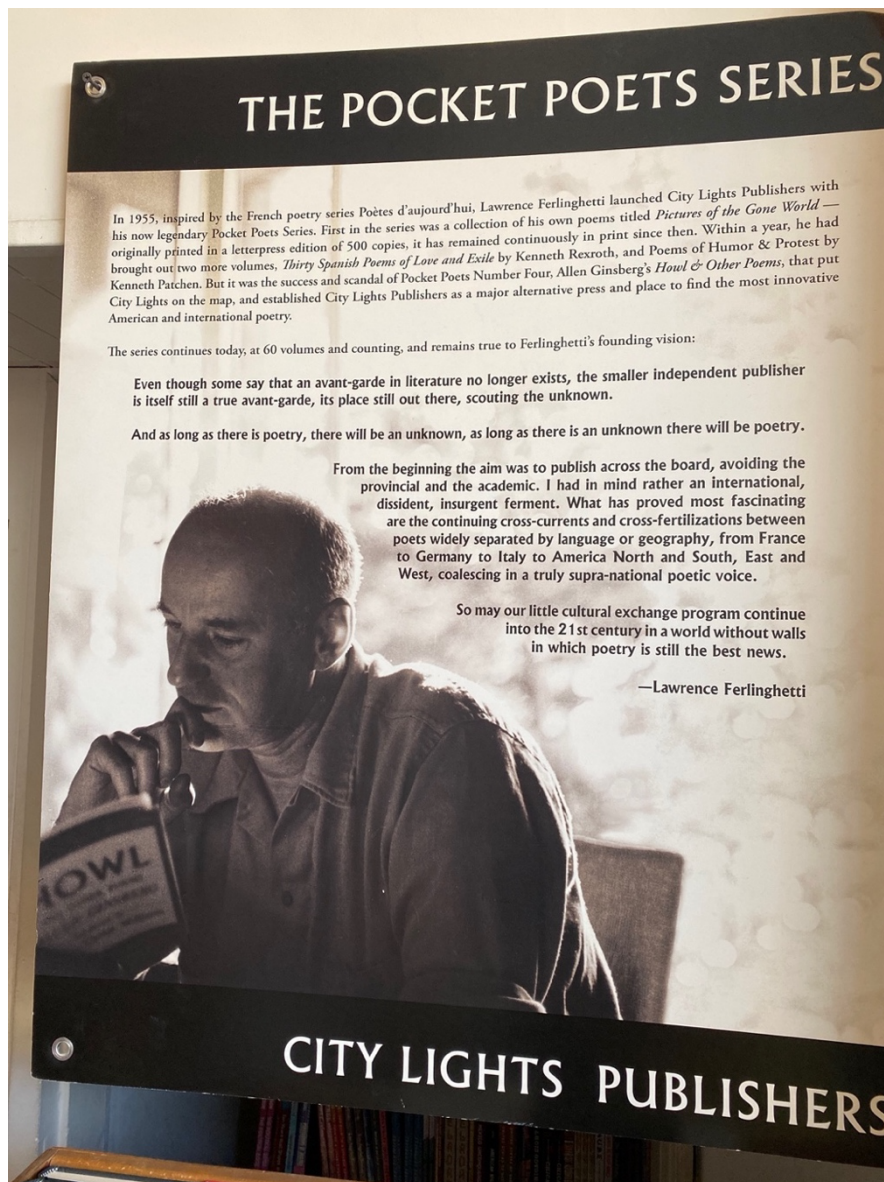
Titled 'Rigidity' we find ourselves in that self-conscious moment before the leap, the creative act. Marc himself played the saxophone in his teens. This held-back point in time is counterpointed by



Upstairs at Vesuvio café across from City Lights Bookshop.

the next poem 'Less Than Burlesque' which reveals the whole roar of open and illicit but easily accessed desire that overwhelms fired up adolescence: 'counted ourselves lucky bumming drinks from strippers in cum-stained San Francisco'.

The change in theme for both a city watering hole and its poetic evocation happens seamlessly. We glide between 'Penciled' featuring 'Major Pond's Traveling Chautauqua' (which judging by the name sounds like a 60s/70s concept) to the same location but different identity under a new name and 'theme' – 'Solstice'. Here we find slick décor, smart diners and astral music. In embracing the rough, scuffed, trustworthy nature of Major Ponds he observes that he has swapped places with the bar and its over-polished shiny new self. It does make you think how where we sit and contemplate affects us. The family-owned café (where we feel part of the tribe) or the business back, 'I washed back twenty years tonight'. And we all know that this innocence will never come back. He also reflects on what he was searching for – hope – and where to find it. A hope that delivers something, anything, that doesn't deaden the soul.



Ferlinghetti's vision.



Individual incidents occur with a type of kindness and loving desire that also shelters and harbours him in some way, which reflect a loving moment as in 'Unclasped'. Every poem a scene, a scenario that could be and clearly *is still* replayed, often featuring a 'You', the other, a woman, often. Or skewed desire with an up close and personal drag queen as he plays pool. And of course, we are taken to visit the poetic breathing spaces that make San Francisco – 'Pressed Tin' centres on legendary City Lights Bookshop, observing the actual space, the books on tables, the sense of reverence or at least marking the moment, of being there – his 'gait a half-step lighter than when I arrived'. Though in referring to windows that aren't meant to be looked out of, a sense of detachment begins to swim. Maybe like many of such places you sense a closed impenetrable community.

Even today it is hard not to enter some cinematic mind when in City Lights, talking to the assistant, then descending down to the film books. I let myself float away, the engine room of Beat myth and legend. Holding back being too reverential since wasn't it *their* words, their impassioned deliveries that broke down such artificial walls. Though now somehow well-behaved, this architectural



The writing is still on the wall. 'The Godfather' discusses The Godfather –  
'Leave the gun... Take the cannoli is going to be improvised.'  
Francis Ford Coppola with Papa Gianni and Gianfranco Giotta in Caffè Trieste.



homage: the stands, the stairs, the posters, the chequered floor still smell of change writ large – historic momentous change. The books are there as evidence but what of the writers? Well, of course they are still there, in the books. Each one a living tombstone and a self-penned epitaph. I stop off for a retake in the Caffè Trieste where, as if for eternity, at the next table they are discussing a storyboard, (as I pull focus) and then turn to let me know ‘that’s a good camera’ before spooling on. Francis Ford Coppola’s presence oozes from the walls.

In ‘North Beach’ Marc takes us back, mourning for memories ‘of the one I kissed / At the savoy Tivoli /now, only reverie’ as I walk past, having surfaced from being a tourist on the submarine and early automata at Fisherman’s Wharf. We ascend, to look down on Fort Mason (now a centre for arts and culture) where Berlandt stored many of his early film festival reels. I think of Rick Polito’s article in the Marin Independent Journal (November, 2005) when he visited Herman at the NPA offices (which had moved from Fort Mason to South of Market in 2002). I quote ‘Shoved into a space above SOMAR gallery in the shadow of Interstate 80, Berlandt surrounds himself in paperwork... no horizontal surface is spared’. He was immersed in his last crowning mission – to start an International Poetry Museum, a natural extension of all he had achieved before. Looking down at the historic orange roofs at Fort Mason, I am reminded of that fateful day in 1991 when George Aguilar wandered in to discover him in a state of disorganisation in a small windowless office. Today, cleaned up and gleaming a non-profit arts hub has now found its home, transforming what were once military buildings. Though I am told that the San Francisco Art Institute has now gone bankrupt the remaining galleries and cafes are (literally) hanging in, and



Fort Mason glowing, shadowed by the Golden Gate Bridge.

international artists are frequent exhibitors. I can't help thinking that, setting aside the sense of an urban chic shift from uncompromised utilitarian soul to a designed space, somewhere Herman must be smiling and dancing.

Our journey takes us along the shore, on the wrong unfiled side of the Golden Gate Bridge. I unwind alongside herons picking their way in rippling shallows. Swimmers plunge into the November water, whilst back in Union Square iceskaters obediently circle under the mammoth Christmas trees, Saks to Macy's, Saks to Macy's, field and consumer time blurring. My mind rests in Mission itself, where I reach out and touch the oldest building in the city – the Spanish Mission San Francisco de Asis (aka Mission Dolores) that rises quietly, sublimely, pale and blushing alongside a palm and bird-filled, verdant cemetery. It also provides filmmakers with a doubly religious site: clearly recognizable as the church in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and as the location of Carlotta Valdes' grave. The film crew left it there, but too many film tourists destroyed the peace and sanctity of the graveyard, so it was taken away.

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**Poems by Poetry Filmmakers**  
**Marc Zegans & Sarah Tremlett (UK)**

a reading and sharing of Poetry Films & their historic connection to San Francisco;  
celebrating the publication *The Poetics of Poetry Film* & the  
just published *LYON STREET's* poems of San Francisco!

**Thursday November 10th, 6.30 PM, free**



But we must wake up, and travel with Marc as he enters the next darker phase of history that we all know too well: the Reagan / Thatcher phase. Where life gets scary and messy as he recounts in 'P(un)k Poets Too Fucked to Drink', shooting up crossovers between punk, Republicanism, and nihilism; and a scream of Kill the Poor 'red states more scared of welfare / than war, and tuck sunny Ron / in Washington'. How can we talk about unaffordable urban chic as a salve for our consciences, as whole communities are strafed; as if we would all be okay if we dressed a certain way.



As a British person, visiting San Francisco you find yourself irrevocably changed; maybe haunted by flying car chases and Steve McQueen in *Bullitt* (1968) as much as life-changing bards. The walls, the photographs, the buildings, the people ... exactly as prescribed in the songs and the fables. I might add songs not written include the hotel advising us not to walk left, in case we might encounter homeless people: of course we do, and do pass this banned spot. Molten eyes glazed over. Lives visibly arrested / lost. And why visit a city if not to know the whole story.

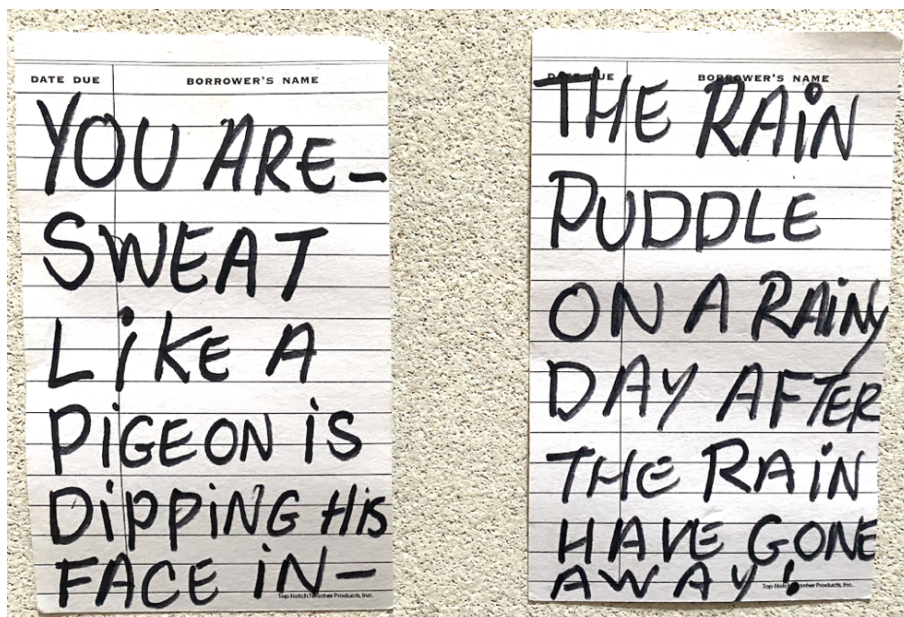
In the book, the penultimate poetic text 'San Francisco' like the city herself zigzags down the page, at most four words to a line and often a single word, it begins ruefully:

hard talk  
    against  
        an  
            empty wall

and the poet does not fail to convey his own sense of loss incurred in the changes forced on it: 'this city / that remaindered / its soul'

But importantly, Zegans reminds us of his own fragile position as the young poet: 'this hungry broken soul / who read his heart out / to an empty room' comparing it to an empty house of pleasure.

Before the event at Adobe, when I was waiting with my husband on the sofa, surrounded by books, a guy who had wandered in and was chatting with us began to draw on first one then another piece of notepaper culled from the assistant's desk. In large felt tip capital letters he kindly and generously handed them to me. His poetry. At his age and openness, I had no idea if he



A Poem Gift.





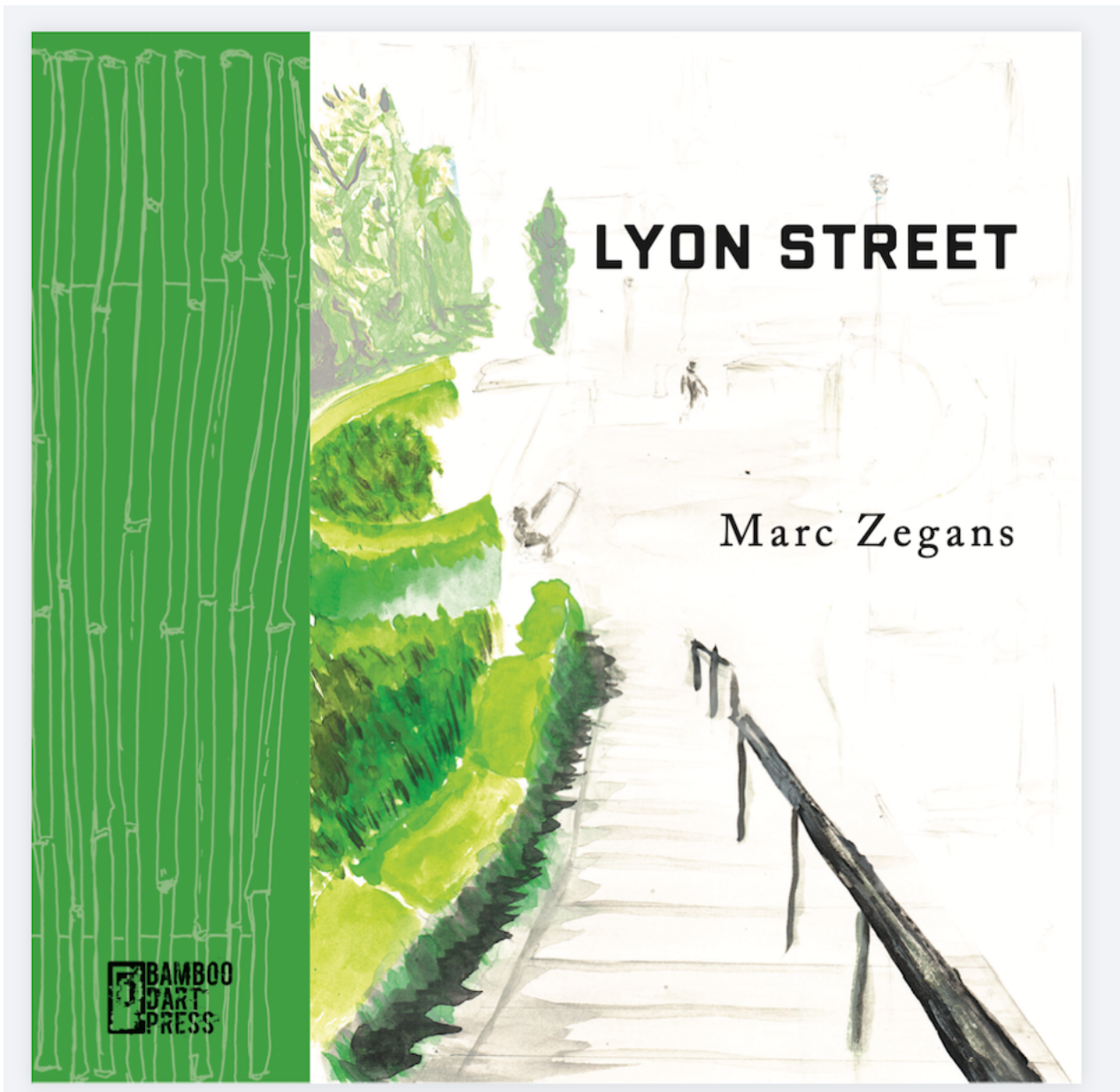
was a seasoned much published ‘bard’, or a man whose soul was open enough to see the poetry in life and wanted to share it. But, since he was a frequent visitor and brought his own particular message, did it really matter? I feel that Herman might have played a part in this.

For me, then, to experience being part of San Francisco first-hand –as well as apprehended through the heart, mind, eye and memory of Marc – brought a double ‘seeing’. As you rise and fall with the varying shabby, touristy or plain charmingly tree-lined streets, walking Marc’s story means revisiting the places that defined his emotional archaeology. But of course, most of them have either disappeared or are in some way changed irrevocably. But if you are looking to hear or speak to ghosts in the few cafes that have retained their heart; or you have no other desire than to dive into the roar of an ocean that has heard it all before – then this journey is most definitely worth the wait.

I would like to end my tour in the footsteps of this inspiring collection (particularly for poets writing on the importance of place) by revisiting the feminine spirit that every so often has descended upon Marc, sent by the city herself. Not for the first time do I think of David Meltzer and in particular his 6<sup>th</sup> Raga / for Bob Alexander (*David’s Copy, The Selected Poems of David Meltzer*), centred on the shoreline and the outline of a woman in the sand. From ‘Less than Burlesque’ to the concluding poem ‘Starting’ which philosophically returns us to a cleared mind – one that is swimming in the sea at sunset – ‘she’ is there. Here he gives in to the tide, then speaking of the sun ‘In the moment / Before she slips / Beneath her covers’, the final feminine form seems to come to rest.

### **About the poet**

Marc Zegans is the author of, among others, the poetry collections *Lyon Street*, *The Underwater Typewriter*, and *Pillow Talk*, and two spoken word albums, *Marker and Parker* and *Night Work*. He was Narragansett Beer Poet Laureate and a Poetry Whore with the New York Poetry Brothel—which Time Out New York described as “New York’s Sexiest Literary Event.” Marc has performed everywhere from the Bowery Poetry Club to the American Poetry Museum. As an immersive theater producer, he created the Boston Center for the Arts’ *CycSpecific “Speak-Easy”* and *Salon Poetique: A Gathering of the “Tossed Generation.”* He also has been MC and co-producer of *The No Hipsters Rock ‘n Roll Revue* and co-producer, with Karen Lee, of *Burlesque for Books*. Marc lives near the coast in Northern California. A link to Marc’s professional practice can be found at: [Break through creatively. Thrive and shine as an artist.](#)



*Lyon Street* is available at:

[http://www.bamboodartpress.com/store/marc\\_zegans-lyon\\_street.html](http://www.bamboodartpress.com/store/marc_zegans-lyon_street.html)

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Lyon-Street-Marc-Zegans/dp/1947240617>

For more on Herman Berlandt:

<https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Poet-wants-the-muse-in-a-museum-Bolinas-author-2863450.php>

<https://hermanberlandt.blogspot.com/>

George Aguilar

[https://www.academia.edu/4570517/Keynote\\_Speech\\_IV\\_International\\_Videopoetry\\_Festival\\_2012\\_](https://www.academia.edu/4570517/Keynote_Speech_IV_International_Videopoetry_Festival_2012_)

Adobe Books and Arts Cooperative, Inc. ("Adobe Books" or "Adobe") was founded in 1989 by 'bohemian eccentric' **Andrew McKinley** at 3166 16th Street (see here for a great interview with Andrew <https://www.rawfootagefilmarchive.com/videos/101-2/>). Now with a gallery space, it was one of the institutions associated with the rise of the Mission School.