

# Line Transmitter Installation— A Poem in the Environment

Mark Mendel

OJOS NUMEROSOS is a poem of twenty-three three-line stanzas. It was written to be painted on the sides of buildings, on viaducts, and on other urban surfaces where graffiti is typically found. The verses are in random series and are interchangeable within the poem. They form a chain in the experience of the person moving about town. People confront this poem as they do graffiti or corporate-graffiti/advertising every day. Poetry predates writing and printing. The recent tradition of poetics as a possession of the educated elite grew from its confinement to the printed page; I want this poem to fit the viaduct as the sonnet was once felt to fit the page. This is the sprayed word—the continuous simultaneous transmission of a poem into the environment.

OJOS NUMEROSOS is a poem of twenty-three three-line stanzas. It was written to be painted on the sides of buildings, on viaducts, and on other urban surfaces where graffiti is typically found. Each stanza is painted on a separate wall, randomly, within the project area. The paintings are roughly ten by twenty feet. I determined the three-line structure of the stanzas with a standard lift of metal building scaffold in mind. The three=step lift is as integral to the poem's structure as it is to the modular construction of the buildings themselves. This form is derived from the poem's concept rather than from an archaic literary form. I want the poem to fit the viaduct as the sonnet was once felt to fit the page. I call this verse the scaffold stanza. The order of verses is not predetermined. They are a random series and are interchangeable within the poem. The sequence and number of verses seen by a single reader is the complete poem for that reader.

The verses taken together form a chain. The poem is a chain to be experienced by readers driving or walking in any pattern through the community. The brevity of each stanza allows someone driving or stopped in traffic to read an entire link at once.

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This mechanism for presenting an idea to passengers in a moving car, one fragment at a time, originated with the old Burma-Shave signs along rural roads.

People will confront this poem as they do graffiti, or corporate-graffiti/advertising, every day. Wall murals as art have been accepted by people conditioned by billboards, while poetry remains shackled to the page, confined to bookstores and libraries, out of sight for most people. Modern poems are unfamiliar if not unknown in our public culture. Except for rare recordings and broadcasts the public scale of poems is no larger than that insidious fine print that never gets read. Confined as it is, poetry honors the institutions which harbor it. As a mason by trade, I would like to see the work of bricklayers and carpenters so honored. Rather than write a poem about the environment, I have begun to create an environment of poetry or at least one which includes it as it includes other public writing.

The objective of painting a poem on a wall might be no more than exposing many to a poem in a new way. But this poem, *OJOS NUMEROSOS*, forms a chain in the experience of a person moving about town. The experience of discovery is his. In electrical terms, the reader's visual contact completes the circuit. This is important. In his poem, "Of Being Numerous," George Oppen says:

One must not come to feel that he has a thousand threads in  
his hands  
He must somehow see the one thing;  
That is the level of art  
There are other levels  
But there is no other level of art.

The technique of spraying paint on public walls is one that has yet to be accepted by any but the young. But if, as Margaret Mead suggests, only the young are truly native to a culture of constant accelerated change; if the young must teach this culture to their elders; then we must begin to spray poetry. If the press is obsolete, so is the poster. Paper that comes between the poem and the brick is both extraneous and wasteful. Finally there is an outlaw value in the brightly-colored, sprayed word. Daring as

Rimbaud's "thief of fire," a high school drop-out finds his political voice with a can of Dayglo-Saf-T-Orange. Using technology's newest paintbrush, people long considered verbally inarticulate have expressed the anguish of their oppression.

I began spraying this poem in the eastern half of Cambridge, Mass., in May 1975. I used a Wagner 300 airless paint sprayer. As of this writing there are ten verses up and I hope to install another five verses this year. Obtaining permissions for the walls has been an arduous job, and the entire poem may take a while to install. A different lettering style has been used for each verse; accompanying graphics are minimal.

This is the sprayed word: a poem fired from a gun, a mid-summernight's special—the continuous simultaneous transmission of a poem into the environment. Poetry existed long before writing. The custom of setting poems in type and printing them in books is a fairly recent phenomenon, and is perhaps to blame for poetry's recent reputation as something for an educated elite. It is exciting to see OJOS NUMEROSOS springing up in the everyday environment rather than its serving a term in that solitary confinement between the covers of a book.

In *The Uses of Disorder* Richard Sennett writes that the chaotic urban situation is a healthy one for human growth: a complex and challenging social matrix in which people can learn the value of change, where they might develop a humanist ethic for dealing with an unpredictable world. Perhaps someone reading this poem—painted on various walls, in a medium usually associated with disorder—might feel less afraid of urban chaos; might even feel, there on the street, the things of which poets write.

The poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
And, as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.

—Shakespeare, *A Midsummernight's Dream*

## WHY POETRY SMALL AND CRAMPED

Why poetry small and cramped, why poetry starved and mean, thin-lipped and sunken-cheeked? Why these pams, these narrow-shouldered negatives? (The best we can say is that they're seed catalogs.) And why those staring eyes, so carefully fixed on the photographic plate? Why no lips at all but in their stead the practiced line of anger and the clamped jaw? Why always the darkening halo, so seemingly satanic? (The best we can say is that they are trying to mirror our lives. Do they know our lives? Can they read past the symbols of our trade?) Why so much attention to the printed page, why the cosmetology of font and rule, meters laid on like fingernail enamel? Why these lisping indentations, Spanish question marks upside down? Why the attractive packaging of stanza? Those cartons so pretty, shall I open them up? Why the un-American-activity of the sonnet? Why must grown people listen to rhyme? How much longer the polite applause, the tickle in the throat?

What will fatten you, skinny little book? What will put lead in your pencil? All of you dust-collecting seed catalogs, to the Goodwill you go, to the broad stench of the paper mill! Seed catalog, go pulp yourself!

Poems, flowers of language, if that's what you are, grow up in the air where books come true. And you, thin packet, let your seed fly, if you have any.

—Karl Shapiro

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Photographs are by Jonathan Newman, proprietor of the 247 Gallery in Salem, Mass.

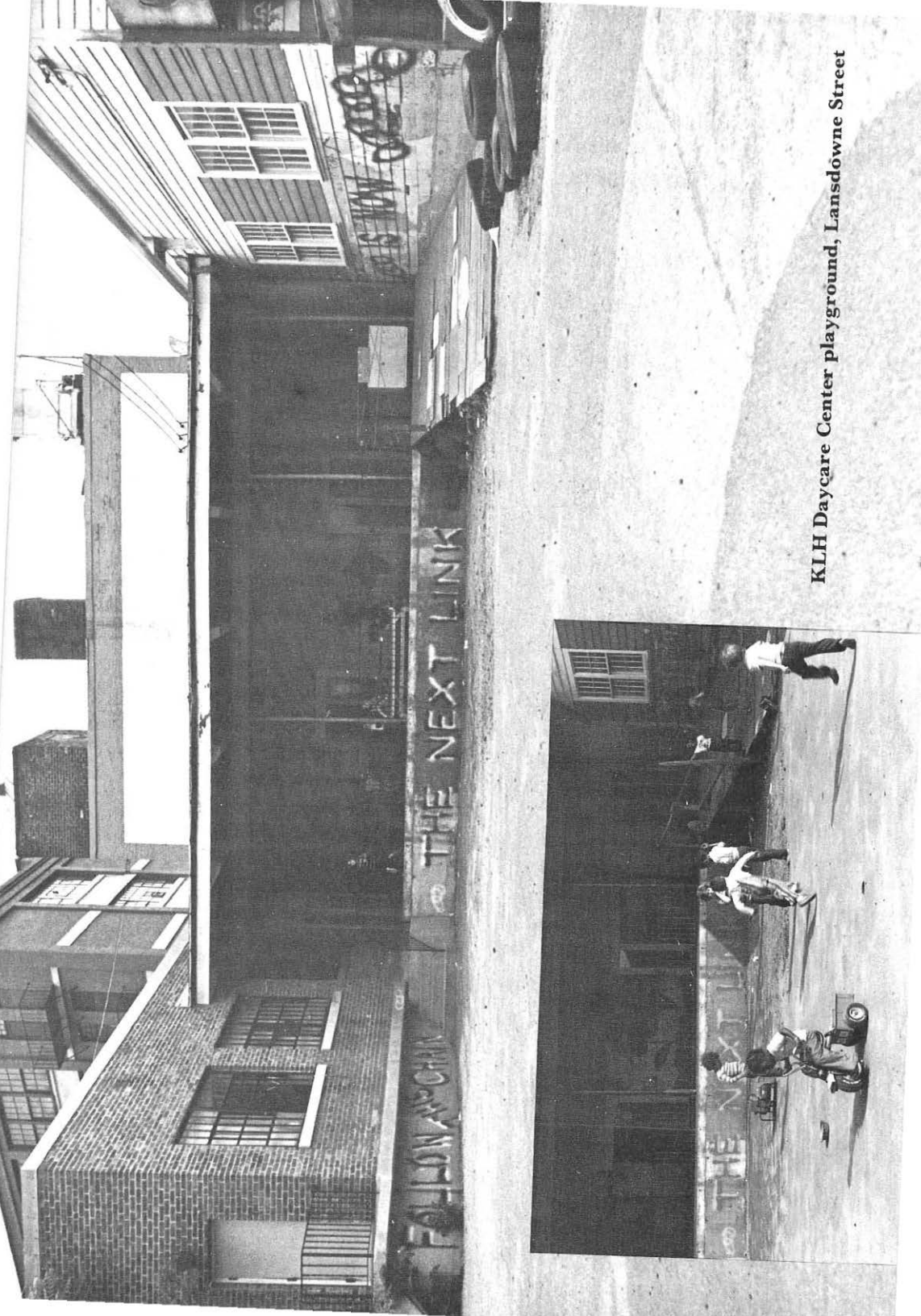
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PULL THIS CHANGE  
THE TROWEL WAS HERE  
LIKE YOUR HEART

© M<sup>th</sup> 75

NOV. 1967 ZONE  
EMERGENCY  
ARTERY  
NO PARKING  
DURING THE  
SNOW  
EMERGENCY  
PERMIT

Orion Research (medical instrument factory), Putnam Avenue



KLH Daycare Center playground, Lansdowne Street

GRAB THIS CHAIN  
YOU CAN. YOU LIVE  
BEHIND THIS WALL

© M. J.  
78



Deuce of Clubs Bar, Main Street

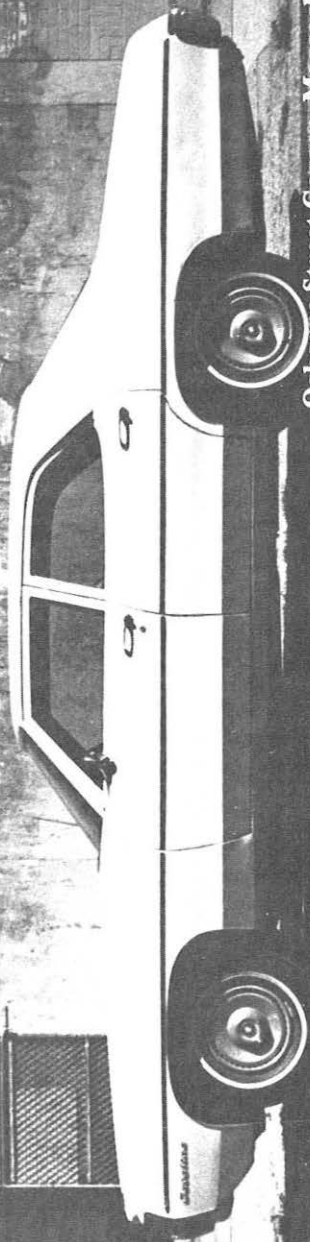
PULL THIS CHANGE  
THE POEM IS YOUR SISTER  
ON PAROLE

© M. ...  
15 ...

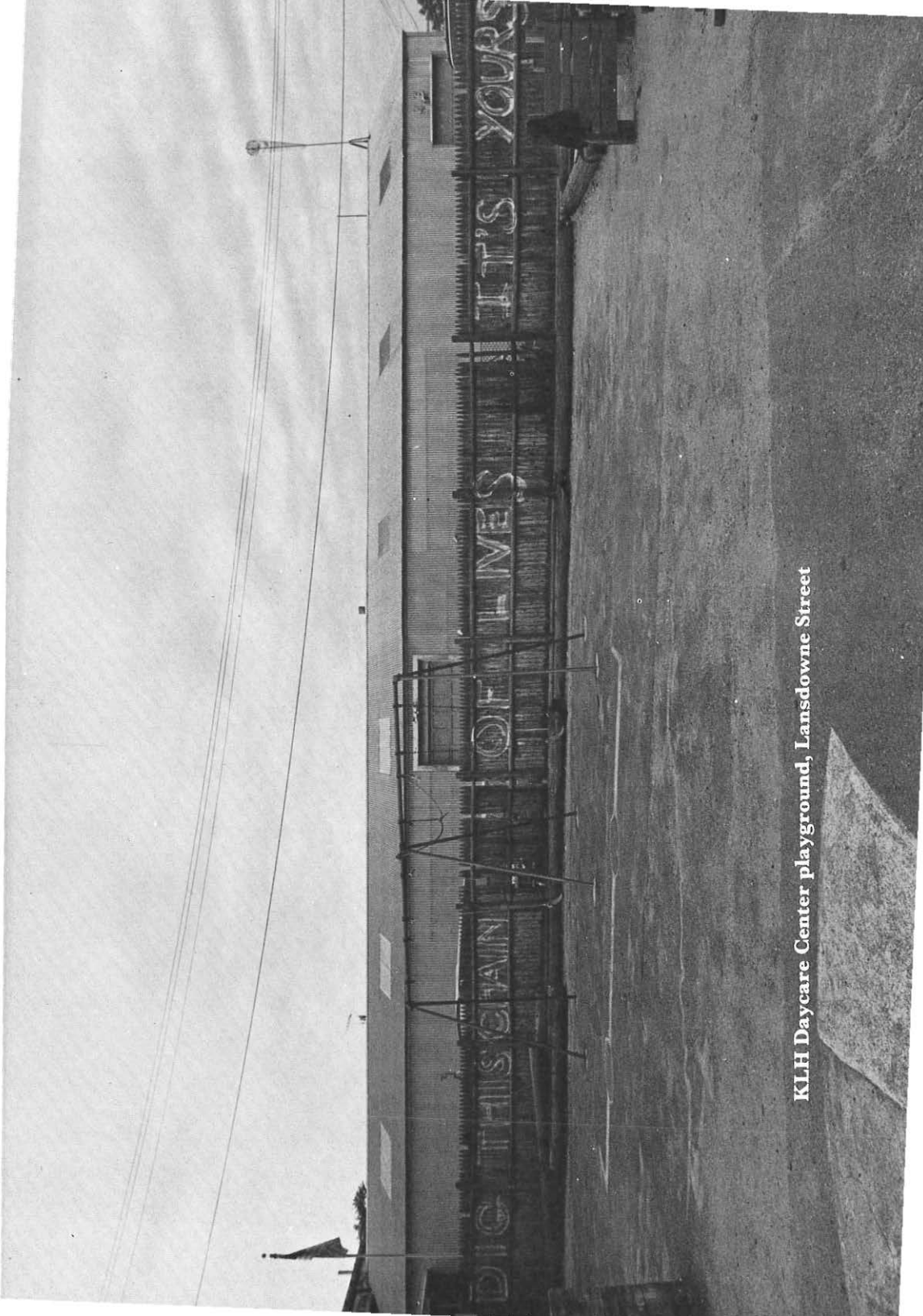
Women's Health Collective, Hampshire Street



PULL THIS CHANGE  
UNGLOVED HAND  
— NO BOUNDARY



Osborne Street Garage, Massachusetts Avenue



**KLH Daycare Center playground, Lansdowne Street**

PULL THIS CHANGE  
RUSTY HANDS  
AND MUSCLE

Garage  
Service  
1100 Franklin Street

Garage, Franklin Street

FEEL THIS CHAIN  
CHEVROLET GIRL  
MILTON W.

Heek this chain

Catch the man

who throws your shadow

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PULL IT THIS CHANGE  
SWEET AND TWEENTY  
RECKLESS DUST

Carlton  
VINN  
SANDWICH  
SHOP

Vinnie's Luncheonette - MBTA Station, Kendall Square