[ESSAY]

TO EXTEMPORIZE IS HUMAN

PowerPoint is dandy, but an online poetry jam shows that preparation has its limitations.

By Ken Gordon

BACK IN MAY, I started a weird Web site called QuickMuse. The idea was to have virtuoso writers create poetry live and in (virtual) public, on an assigned theme, against a 15-minute clock. The best part: My Web designer created a software program (the Poematic, he calls it) that records and plays back each riff, rejection, and revision. So QuickMuse is the only place in the world you can watch former poet laureate Robert Pinsky stutter his way to coherence: "My"—*delete*—"I"—*delete*—"He was"—*let's try this again*—"He had the generosity of an artist . . . "

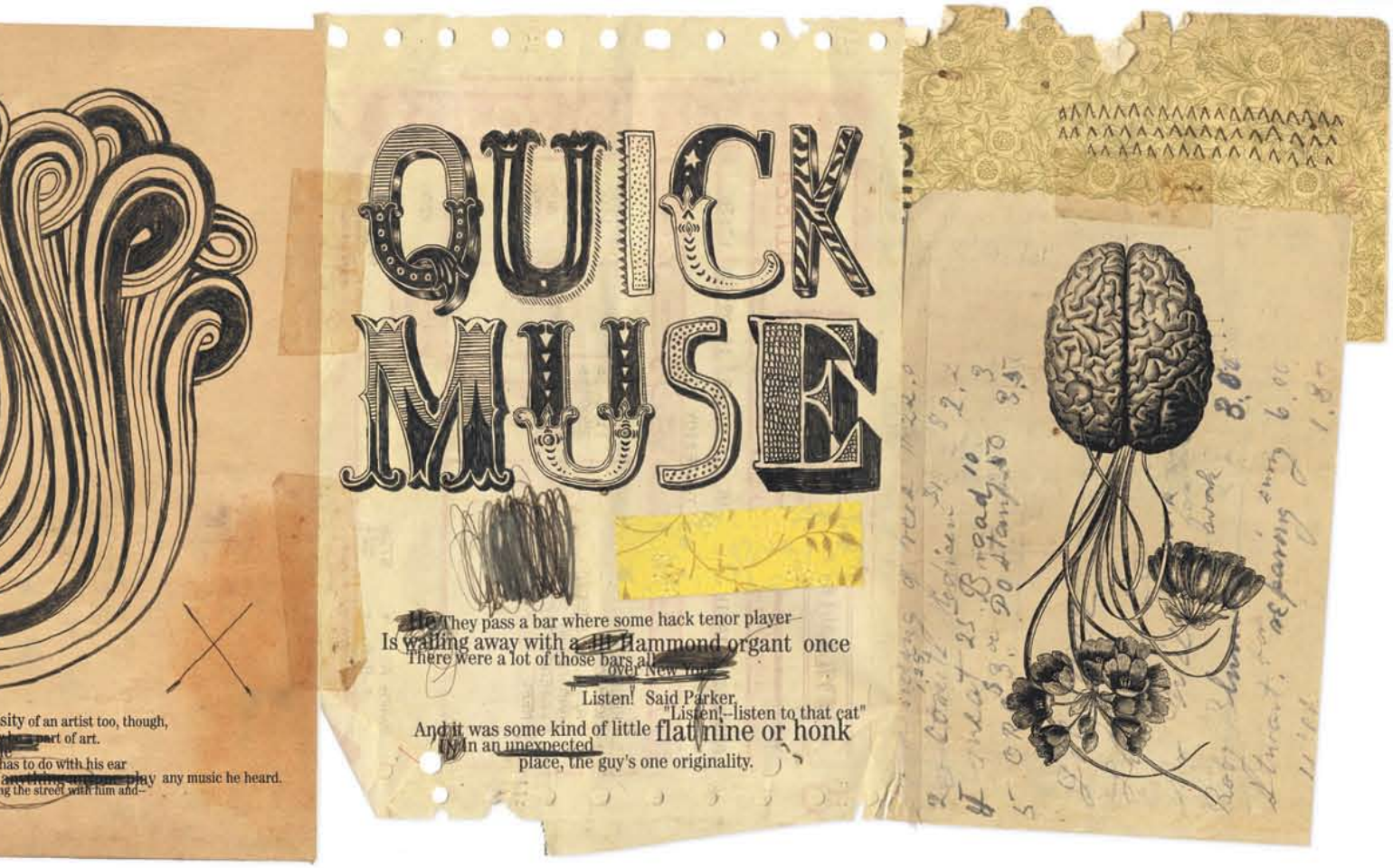
At first I thought we had just created a cool new Internet experience. We'd give visitors a sort of X-ray of the creative mind, turning a quintessentially private pastime into a public performance. But QuickMuse turned out to be more than that. Ultimately, what we're seeing there is an exercise in self-trust. Improvisation urges us to believe in our own first impulses and to fearlessly broadcast this information to the world.

We improvise far more often at work (and everywhere else, for that matter) than we realize. Say you're in a meeting and the big boss barks, "So what are your brilliant new ideas?" Suddenly, it's showtime. You have to look this guy in the eye and demonstrate that you're an intelligent, enthusiastic employee, and you won't cut it with some dead-on-arrival canned pitch. When your star sales rep walks into your office, closes the door, and tells you she's leaving for a competitor, it's time to extemporize—and you'd better be good.

QuickMuse demands that poets flex an underutilized set of muscles, which can be a painful experience. The ease and ready-for-press look of electronic communication has made them, and all of us, a little lazy. The possibility that our mistakes can be obliterated with a few clicks fosters an I-can-fix-it-in-post-production attitude.

Our poetry-on-the-fly confronts this trend, sort of like when Freud put a strict time limit on therapy sessions to speed up the therapeutic process. If you've ever pulled an all-nighter preparing a 30-page PowerPoint presentation, when you might have delivered a more vivid message to clients just

Illustration by Eduardo Recife



by winging it, then you'll understand the QuickMuse philosophy. Sometimes overpreparation can be lethal to your communication skills. "Improvisation frees us from being perfect, being in control, thinking ahead, and second guessing," says Linda Naiman, a consultant on creativity. "It can feel like jumping into the abyss at first, but once you jump, fear turns into excitement, and your imagination kicks in."

The main problem with our quotidian improvisations is mapped out nicely in the classic film *My Dinner With André,* in which quixotic theater director André Gregory says, "We live in a world in which fathers, or single people, or artists are all trying to live up to someone's fantasy of how a father or a single person or an artist should look and behave." What he means is that too often, we stick to the script of societal expectations instead of relying on our own ideas of how we should behave or speak. When we take our cues from the outside—from our boss's body language or staid employee handbooks—rather than from our own impulses, we wind up speaking a language that is neither original nor true. In a work setting, that translates into safe but unimaginative communication, littered with accepted jargon that moves no one.

QuickMuse demands that poets be original and true in real time. In one jam, Thylias Moss started to write:

nuclei of oxygen
penetrate—*no; too mild*

Then she changed her mind and wrote:

and nuclei of iron, nuclei of oxygen
attack, barrel through the eyeball

It was shocking—invigorating—to watch Moss make the composition process itself part of the poem. An amazing and time-sensitive moment. She later told me that the experience was "a kind of striptease for thinking. I didn't have time to put on (all of) my usual layers, so I shared some gist, crux, some foundation, some skeletal system with strangers. Fantastic."

Some poets, like Pinsky, innately get this. "I have been doing this kind of composing . . . for most of my life," he says. "I know that familiar river is there, the river of vowels with its rocky bed of consonants, and I know that any stimulus at all will find related stuff that comes floating down the stream."

Of course, anyone can see stuff floating downstream; it requires skill to make sense of it and articulate it in real time. But that's learnable, a matter of experience. What's harder is having the courage to put yourself in charge of the things you say—to express what's on your mind, and not necessarily on your public-speaking note cards. It's as simple as being straightforward with a client, or candid with a subordinate. Until you try improvising, your sense of self is more or less a supposition—and your performance is the poorer for it.

Ken Gordon is a writer in Newton Centre, Massachusetts.