

AN INTERVIEW WITH RONALD SUKENICK

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Although Ronald Sukenick, like many innovative writers today, exists on the margins of the literary establishment in America, he has managed to publish so far four novels (*Up, Out, 98.6, Long talking bad conditions blues*) and a collection of short fictions (*The death of the novel and other stories*). He has also written a critical study of Wallace Stevens' poetry (*Musing the obscure*) and a book of essays on contemporary literature (*In form*). Apart from creative writing itself Sukenick has been at the very heart of such projects as Fiction Collective and *The American Book Review* which for several years now have been educating the reading public to the intricacies of New Fiction. His writing is characterized by formal audacity, linguistic exuberance, general playfulness and, most important, a deliberately disquieting narrative voice which is at all times heard "testing, probing and imagining the ways in which we construct and organize the world for ourselves". The formal occasion for the present interview which took place in New York on May 5, 1983 was the completion of Sukenick's new book of fiction (*The endless short story*); still, like much of his own writing, the interview begins and ends "pretty much for no reason".

— *For me one of the most troubling of your fictions is the tape-recorder piece "Roast beef: a slice of life". I simply find it baffling. What's the basic idea behind it?*

— Well, it's not baffling if you think of Klinkowitz's theories in his *The self-apparent word* manuscript. It's a kind of equivalent of photorealism. As far as I can see it's the best example of what Klinkowitz is talking about. "Roast beef" is an attempt to show the fact that realism is just a set of literary conventions about the way we observe things. "Roast beef" is a kind of minimalist piece. But I think that my version of that kind of realism that's been popular for the last five or eight years in the art-world, especially in painting and sculpture (replicas, plastercasts), is a little bit more sophisticated by being a little more naive — intentionally. What I'm trying to show is not that you can pick up actual reality with the recording medium —

I'm trying to show that you can't, trying to show that they are completely different levels. First there's the level of the original act, then there's the level of the sonic snapshot as I sometimes call it, of the taperecording which is missing all the cues of reality that are visual for example.

— *And what happens if you combine it with the visual media?*

— If you combine it with the visual media you still have the big distinction — you can reverse it, time can go backwards. And then, to return to the original situation, you have the further distinction of the page, and you can talk about it on the symbolic level. You find that things are modified by each medium — progressively. The way people hear themselves on tape or even see themselves on film, they'll say it doesn't sound, it doesn't look like me. It's because people have an internal image of themselves and then other people have other images of them, and then the recording medium picks up yet another image. Actually that might be a good point to stop right there, because where's the reality of all this? Photographs, for instance, look often very different from most people's perception of a given subject. That's why photography is an art. The difference between phenomena and any kind of man-made version is what makes art actually, I think. There are various peculiar things that come out. For example a good dialogue in actuality, even if it's witty and concise, when you record it exactly and get down on page might not be a good dialogue in literary terms. All this leads to various things. First of all it shows that realism is heavily conventionalized, therefore other conventions are possible and may be better — given the purpose, given the time, given the context. The other thing all this immediately leads to is what the critics of my school of fiction call "self-consciousness" and what I just call "increased consciousness" or "heightened consciousness". What we've been talking about makes you inevitably aware of the act of perception and of the media one uses for perception. It makes you immediately aware of what is by now a familiar analogy with modern sciences, especially nuclear physics where it becomes evident that the instrument of observation affects the observation, becomes part of the situation observed. And I think the analogy is becoming more and more persuasive at the level of normal perception.

— *So how does the taperecorder function in "Roast beef", what does it do to that story?*

— Let's put it this way, the "Roast beef" type of story is a kind of demystification of "realism". The presence of the recording medium as an entity in the story ends up showing the importance not of "realism" but rather the importance of consciousness. And it's not a particular artistic medium that makes you self-conscious but it's the whole thrust of post-industrial civilization. It might be expressed in the cliché "feedback". Any kind of presence or entity that might give you information is capable of

making you more conscious. Everything in a culture has a mirroring effect, has feedback, tends to make you think about not only what you see but how you see it and how you should respond to it. This process of making one increasingly self-conscious, as I did in "Roast beef" by placing a microphone there as an entity, demonstrates that the general civilized thrust is towards consciousness. It may be that there is always some resistance to it, it may be that there are things that have to be given up for this increased consciousness. Maybe it makes life seem more difficult to be aware of more things. What the "Roast beef" kind of story does is 1. makes you aware of the conventional nature of the received ideas of literature, 2. it leads directly to the perception of consciousness and to the fact that you can work with consciousness as opposed to simply accumulating data.

— *Does this story, then, pass in effect "the death sentence" on the novel featured in the title of the collection in which it appears?*

— Well, it's a kind of ironic title. It's *The death of the novel and other stories*, in other words the idea of the death of the novel is just part of the general cultural narrative that will continue; so it doesn't matter much whether any particular narrative falls by the wayside.

— *In general, now that we know that there is no way to adequately capture reality in literature, don't you think we should try to move beyond this tantalizing and frustrating reality/realism debate? People have always thought they have to define fiction against some kind of understanding of reality and realism in literature. Would it be possible to define fiction in its own right as it were?*

— Yes, it's true that people think of the novel as "realism", especially in this country. I think it's a part of the American trust in the empirical and the pragmatic as opposed to what comes directly out of cogitation. There's also distrust of introspection, what you see instead is placing trust in information, data, statistics, facts. And yet at the same time the whole idea of empiricism has been called into question by modern science. It seems to me that one of the directions you must take is "in", to investigate the nature of consciousness. You have to know the instruments that are being used to observe if you are going to make valid observations these days. The problem with fiction is that in our tradition the novel is very much wedded to a particular kind of novel, to the realistic novel.

— *So shouldn't the New Fiction be called something else? Many of these books don't read like novels and some of them don't even look like what we've known to be novels.*

— It would be a great blessing if one could think of some other category that would take hold of the public mind or at least the critical mind. It's funny, but labels do have an enormous influence. It would be a great liberation to find a label releasing fiction and narrative from certain obligations. The idea of the novel is held in place by the way the publishing industry

works. This new term would probably have to come out of the area of narrative. Also, we need a category that would include the possibility of poetic techniques. Actually, there have appeared some alternatives, like the term "romance" which I don't like much, or "fabulation" which I hate.

— *Basically, what we're talking about is imaginative writing. Romance, i.e. romance as a postmodern form, is, I think, acceptable as a term. At least it dissociates fiction from the tradition of the realistic novel. But then it's only one of the many tendencies in contemporary fiction.*

— The thing I know is that if I presented a manuscript to a publisher as "narrative" it would be put in the novel category anyway.

— *To get back to the idea of self-consciousness, you said somewhere, as did Ray Ferderman, that there's more emphasis in fiction now on "consciousness" rather than the "self". Could you elaborate on that?*

— First of all, to talk about the artist's self is rather pointless because it's nothing you can know, nothing you know about from the text. Books and authors are very different things, even if it is the author who writes the book. It's certainly interesting, for example, to bring whatever light you can to bear on D. H. Lawrence's career but finally D. H. Lawrence's books are not important because of D. H. Lawrence but the other way round.

— *But then with some texts you're more aware of artistic or creative consciousness behind it rather than the textual consciousness of the medium itself, and you naturally associate it with the real author.*

— I'd like to bring Henry Miller into this, especially that I was influenced by him at the beginning of my career. You can talk about self-consciousness here but it's because he's using himself consciously as a character in his novels. But it obviously isn't Henry Miller, the real Henry Miller. It's true, it isn't him, that's the point. Even that kind of self-consciousness, i.e. the author referring to himself, even that is textual. In my case, in *Up* I was doing pseudobiography; I was using some elements of my own biography mixed with fictional elements. And that was a completely new integration of a Ronald Sukenick. So from the very beginning what might seem very self-conscious, even narcissistic, was a very objective use of a specific technique.

— *But why would you insist on using the name "Ronald Sukenick" in your fiction? Is this some kind of exercise in provocation?*

— That's a parallel to what I was trying to do in *The death of the novel*. It's as if to say to the American audience — look, what we're after here is reality and I'm trying my naive best to arrive at that reality to the point even of writing only about myself which is one thing I should know about, and which you have to trust me about because I'm the only one who knows about it. But the fact is that it's impossible, this realism. The closer you get to the actual person or the actual event in life, the more evident, the

more glaring the difference becomes. There is some kind of critical point, there is actually geometrical increase in the distance between life and art — the closer you get to life.

— *Is it something that you discovered in the course of your career?*

— I can't remember whether I discovered it before or during my writing career. But I remember that I kind of stumbled on it in my writing. There are stories in *The death of the novel*, like "Momentum", where I made a real effort to capture everything and then I had to think about it and I added marginal notes (on the margin that is) and in that story you can see this process actually happening: trying to get things as they happened and discovering that you can't. But you also have to remember that at that time there was a general breakdown of the distinction between art and life at the cutting-edge of the American art. The most obvious example was happenings, it was like removing a frame, trying to have art actually move out into life. That's what cubism began, in a way. Instead of receding back into the imagination, as in traditional Western painting, art projects itself into life, physically becoming a part of it. But in those stories I was trying to preserve this distinction between art and life, because at least in America it can be lost at the great expense of art. The immediate reaction, popular reaction, will be: if life is art, who needs art in that case? So my idea was to push realism into "real realism", if you want, into sonic realism or photo realism, or biographical realism, and then showing finally that you can't make that equivalence, that there always remains distinction between imagination and reality. And it's a beneficial distinction. The basic difference between art and life is the difference between phenomena and reflection. And the American impulse has always been to get rid of reflection — which means consciousness, introspection and so on. In some ways this impulse is healthy as a corrective to abstraction. I think it's a great advantage of the American mentality but on the other hand we don't want to lose the other pole. So my effort at that time was seemingly driving towards a kind of naive realism, but in fact it was a pretty sophisticated attempt to retain the idea of art in the face of its obliteration, i.e. obliteration of the distinction between life and art.

— *Talking about the idea of a frame, your first novel doesn't seem to have one, and the end of it — with all these real characters, your real-life friends you invite to celebrate the completion of the book — "Up" seems to project itself into factual reality. Also, given all the different styles and narrative techniques you employ there, the novel appears to be struggling with itself. But then I find it a very tightly contained narrative. The clue to it, I think, is what one of the characters says about "Ronald Sukenick": "The problem with you is that you don't fit anywhere". Was your idea to write a book that wouldn't fit anywhere, was it deliberate?*

— I'm definitely a formalist. For me all my novels have a very distinct

form, and I think *Up* has one, I don't think there's any question about that. It's just that it isn't a standard form, that's all. For me the point is to push form to the point where it breaks new ground. I want to reach formal properties that are not yet categorizable and therefore not yet recognizable. And the reason for that is simply that this way you arrive at information that's not yet categorizable, not taken into consciousness yet. I think that you need a formal release in order to take in new information. And then you need to incorporate the information in a form dictated at least in part by the information, and it will be a new form. That seems to me the most interesting thing — to be able to work with form that is not a form yet. It's a fairly obvious movement of modern art in its release from tradition. The problem is that modern art has gotten frozen in its own formalism because the forms of release, of liberation, are even harder to fight against now than the forms of tradition which are more identifiable. Some people try to solve this problem by going back to the old forms, but you can't go back to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, so that's a dead end. The thing is, there isn't a permanent liberation, you've got to keep working on it. So it's very difficult to retain the modern spirit but at the same time to go beyond the modern achievement. You got to break this connection with modernism and I think even the connection with the avant-garde. I don't like the idea of avant-garde very much; because it's traditional already, it has too many associations, it's too shackling. Anyway, I think the most acute problem is not the idea of form but the idea of closure which is something like a frame, though not exactly. Given that a frame has to exist, what kind of frame is it going to be? Maybe it's a totally new kind of frame, a more dynamic kind of frame. There's another dimension added to framing. I think of it as a sort of tunnel-form in which some kind of tube is defining the form but there's no beginning nor end, like in my new short story collection. The disturbing thing for people who have read it is that there's no sense of closure, things just sort of go on and on, there's no end-point; these stories do stop but pretty much for no reason, just as they begin for no reason. That's something typically American about this endless forward motion, it's like driving on one of those long highways.

— How is *"The endless short story"* organized as a book? I've read a couple of pieces from it that have been published independently earlier and I've noticed that they are quite different from one another.

— I think of it as a kind of mind that goes through space and that changes shape as it moves. All the stories are in fact connected by little bridges. And the main idea is that of transition. So there's this alphabet soup shape, and then it gets shaped like a column and then there's a story in the shape of boxes and a story that looks like a conventional story; there's also a story that looks like an essay.

— I like especially the story *"Five and ten"* from that collection. And this

is where I would apply my understanding of the term *"self-apparent fiction"*. The topological design of the story is one thing, but a more important thing I find in it is the way you use or handle language there. It's immediately recognizable as imaginative writing. Deliberate pronominal confusion, unsettled or unfinished statements, sometimes outright agrammatical utterances — this is where you open up language to a new response, not unlike poetry.

— I don't see why fiction should be denied identification with the poetic. I think there's a big confusion between the idea of poetry and the idea of verse, actually the distinction seems to be breaking down now. I don't write verse, I don't want to write poetry in that sense. But beyond that I believe fiction can utilize the techniques of poetry. Basically, however, *"narrative"* is the idea or term that is becoming more and more important for me; at the beginning I didn't think much about it, I just thought I was writing fiction.

— Even though it's basically a neutral term *"narrative"* is quite meaningful. First of all it implies progression, and once we dissociate it from the obligation of describing things as an end in itself we get the movement of language, language as an imaginative process, or simply language happening on the page.

— I think *"narrative"*, whether it's language happening or characters happening or plot happening, implies movement in time, implies some kind of dynamic progression that I think poetry does not have. A way to distinguish between poetry and narrative would be to make a distinction between stasis and movement. In that way it leaves poetry with its dignity and uses as contemplative art; that's what seems essential to it — kind of reformulation and reformulation in an illuminating way. And it can be part of narrative, but narrative is also about the way things happen, if only about the way language happens. And it seems to me that's precisely what poetry is *not* about, it may be about the way we perceive things happening. Even in that story *"Five and ten"* there's progression, movement. It is development of language but there's also the system of the story developing. There's also a progression of mood and other things happening. It's definitely not a contemplative story. That's why poets' novels fail, because they tend to be contemplative and not dynamic.

— In *"Long talking bad conditions blues"* you say that the important thing is *"not what it [fiction] is but that it is"*, and all your books are certainly *"there"* as concrete objects in the world, so to speak. Also, the main character in that novel *"didn't believe in ideas abstraction went against his nature"*. I take these two statements to be a kind of self-definition of your writing. Still, there seems to be some kind of private mythology emerging from your fiction — all these references to astrology, cult or religious figures, even the occult. And it seems to be developing into an esoteric system of sorts. How does it go along with your preference for concreteness and this declared dislike of abstraction?

— I'm groping towards a reinstitutionalization of the idea of the sacred.

Since T. S. Eliot the attempt has been to demystify, to desacralize language and I'm, interested in reinstating a sacred use of language. By that I don't mean religious use of language, what I mean is that there should be uses of language reserved for the spiritual, the reflective.

— *So that doesn't mean that you're trying to create or get at a body of ideas or beliefs.*

— No, nothing like that. Maybe the best example of what I'm trying to get at is Gertrude Stein's writing, although I don't particularly like it. I think she was using a sacred language. I don't think she thought she was doing it, but I don't care what she thought she was doing. The main thing is that her writing moves out of the realm of the vulgate, in the sense of common language. Her language is a special language that is used for sacramental purposes, I would say.

— *But does it stay with on the level of language?*

— Yes, it does. The idea is to tear language away from its referents and return it to its sources. It's using language in a very self-conscious manner. When I say "sacramental" I mean it puts you in touch with the sources of language as opposed to specific uses of language. The idea is to turn language back on itself, that's how it gets in to the realm of repetition, chant, prayer. Especially repetition, it's a basic linguistic break that you can make with ordinary language. It's like that second level of tape-recording where you can repeat things. And once you repeat something it's not in the realm of happening, i.e. common happening. That's why Gertrude Stein is interesting here.

— *There are a couple of specific things I'd like to ask you about. One of the most memorable thematic elements in "Up" are rats. They add quite a bit to the story but then at one point you pun on the word and it becomes "stars". Is it connected with the astronaut's flight whereby you get the novel up among the stars and then you bring it down, so to speak, and you have everybody fighting rats again? Can the novel be seen as a kind of flight of imagination — up and down — a cosmic travel but within these two poles, the stars and the down to earth reality?*

— Yes, very much so. *Up* is an imaginative flight where things are transmuted, rats into stars, and so on.

— *There's also this very interesting kite flying scene.*

— Oh, yes, it's a kind of mini repetition of the movement of the book.

— *And then you have another kite flying scene in "Out" which is, however, different. It reads like a dream, a little bit out of control and very imaginative. And while "Up" is very tightly contained, you let "Out" literally out. For me the two respective kite scenes inform the structure and movement of these novels.*

— You've got a point there. The kite scene in *Out* was certainly more out of control, in fact it was a dream I had.

— *Actually, I think that particular scene informs much of your writing which I often find to be an imaginative flight of fantasy, notwithstanding the strict forms or designs you impose on it.*

— In fact the forms I use are sometimes on the edge of what I know. I allow my media mystic functions — often full reign. Talking about kites, the idea there is that you sort of have to catch the wind as something that comes from the outside, like a medium you have to react to, something that doesn't totally depend on you. That's maybe why the wind has been a traditional romantic image for the imagination, like Shelley's "West wind" for example. You're a receptor of forces beyond your control.

— *You have two similar characters in "Out" and "Long talking", i.e. their names are similar: Derrekker, the film director, and Drecker, the dentist. First of all, there's the obvious association with the idea of "dreck". Also, Derrekker literally "wrecks" the movie shooting. But then Drecker — although he's outside the main stream of events in "Long talking" and is the only one with a steady job (in this sense he's a negative character) — has the all-important message: "keep talking [...] if you stop talking you're in trouble".*

— You get the same message in *Out*. Now I can't remember who says it. Actually it doesn't matter in that book because all the characters are just minds for the central mind of the novel. And the same applies to *Long talking*. Besides, negative characters are not necessarily all-negative.

— *Now that "Out" has been filmed it's interesting to note all these references to movie shooting there.*

— Well, I think the real function of fiction is not to record but to predict.