

THE FORM OF THE THING: an interview with bpNichol on Ganglia and grOnk by Geoff Hancock

Rampike presents this never-before published interview as part of its historical documents series. Geoff Hancock, former editor of the *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, conducted this interview with bpNichol. Barrie Philip (bp) was born in 1944 in Vancouver. Among other things he was a poet, performance artist, television writer and editor. As a group, Rafael Baretto-Rivera, Paul Dutton and Steve McCaffery, and bpNichol formed the legendary sound-poetry ensemble, "The Four Horsemen." For many years bp worked as an editor at Coach House Press which in its new manifestation as Coach House Books, maintains a line of Nichol's work (see: Coach House's on-line web-site for further info: <http://www.chbooks.com>). Up until his death in 1988, Nichol remained a staunch advocate of the small presses. He frequently edited and published small press publications, and contributed articles to little magazines around the world, including *Open Letter* and *Rampike* among others. Nichol was also a literary theorist and along with Steve McCaffery generated a series of critical essays under the group name TRG (Toronto Research Group -- see; *Rational Geomancy: The Kids of the Book-Machine: The Collected Research Reports of the Toronto Research Group, 1973-1982*, Talonbooks, Vancouver, 1992 -- ISBN 0-88922-300-9). A number of audio recordings featuring bpNichol and/or The Four Horsemen, as well as the beautifully crafted catalogue *ST. ART: The Visual Poetry of bpNichol* [ISBN: 0-920089-84-4] are available through Underwhich Editions P.O. Box 262, Adelaide Street Station, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5C 2J4, or through Underwhich's western address: 920 9th Avenue North, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada S7K 2Z4. The *ST. ART* catalogue may also be obtained through the Confederation Centre Art Gallery & Museum, 145 Richmond Street, Charlottetown, PEI, Canada, C1A 1J1. And, Talonbooks (Vancouver, Canada) is publishing two new books featuring Nichol's work including bpNichol Comics edited by Carl Peters [ISBN: 0-88922-448-X -- \$24.95] featuring Nichol's comic art; and *Meanwhile: The Critical Writings of bpNichol* edited by Roy Miki [ISBN:0-88922-447-1 \$24.95] -- more info on these two Talon editions can be found at: <http://www.talonbooks.com>.

GH: (interviewer's note) bpNichol was the first writer I met when I moved from Vancouver to Toronto. He invited me out to a pizza place near Dupont and Spadina and we spent much of an evening discussing various possibilities for fiction. I was flattered, honoured, and humbled because I admired bp from afar and thought that as a pioneer in contemporary experimental writing and sound poetry, he was a genius who would consider my *Canadian Fiction Magazine* too conventional, too traditional, and too linear for his tastes. But bp was an artist with a wider perspective. Literature for him evoked wonder, and the mechanical processes of literature, were alive, like a mind. Publishing in its own way could duplicate thought. Perhaps his interest in process was connected to the larger art of living a rich and productive life, and my publishing experiment was no less intimate or important. So we discussed movies, comics, news reports, and psychoanalysis, the usual non-verbal, non-fictional, non-traditional narratives that promise other modes of organizing experience. I need not worry that my views of short narratives -- especially in linear prose -- were any less unconventional than the typographical innovations that delighted him. Over the years, I published several of his "more conventional" pieces such as the excerpts from organ music on heart, tongue, and anus. He raised demanding questions: what could a magazine be, how is form related to content? How does the literary artist find a place in the world of commercial letterpress and trade publishing? How does a writer collaborate with a medium? Besides, how can you represent a discourse when the pizza and beer are being served? At the time I met him I already resented

the traditional format of my own publication. I cared about the world inside the fiction, but outside the fiction was another narrative; the twin subsets of librarians who like regular publication and archived back issues in nice blue bundles of four. Out there, where the world is not a stage, were various arts councils, who liked successive issues to look pretty much like the previous and tended to penalize forays into microfiche, oversize layout, or linguistic events. We were, in fact, approaching the same problem from different angles. How to balance the power of the creative imagination with an uncertainty about the means of presentation; we were self conscious about language, form, and the act of creating, and we liked to play with ideas, make parodies, and criticize our own methods of construction.

bp was interested in Signifier/signified relations. He was a master of signs. Non-verbal constructs draw attention to the fundamental operations of any system when the mind roams freely into quirky corners and whimsical byways. He got me thinking about how literary magazine publishing could draw attention to narrative in traditional non-narrative elements. We talked about surface and deep narrative, about questioning ordered reality, and drawing attention to the structure of an illusion. I had published issues without words, such as the one featuring the works of Martin Vaughn-James which was comprised of photographs, and I was at work on the anthology entitled *Singularities*, which focused on stories not traditionally anthologized. (When the book was finally published, it was conceived as a traditional volume, although I later felt it demanded a more innovative form appropriate to space, fragment, and

dislocated or multi-levelled text.) The day of our interview, I wanted to discuss bp's innovations in contemporary experimental publishing, especially micro or minimalist publishing. bpNichol's *Ganglia*/grOnk Press was a complex small Canadian press. The press worked against the idea of the book, and subverted any notion of regular publishing. Few people have actually seen the press's publications. Yet Nichol's "bibliographic instinct" led him to compile lengthy bibliographies. For anyone interested he created a labyrinth of the press's achievements in nicely arranged computer printouts done on an Amiga computer. bp was squarely in the tradition of non-linear literature. As an innovator in computer texts, he pondered such questions: what is a page? Is it part of something? A container for text or information? An event on its own? Can the Book be a Machine? bp was continuously re-thinking the book and the magazine. The press was a major influence on Canada's underground, "little little" and alternative publishing. bp liked to get beyond the meaning of words to forms and graphics appropriate to the text being explored. bp and I spent a fine summer afternoon, in July 1986, talking about the dynamics of the press. Mostly I listened. Then we toured his science fiction, comic books, and animated movie collection. It was obvious how the comics influenced the poetry. His love of the letters A and H. The cheeky Four Horsemen sound poets. Somewhere, a doctoral candidate is writing a dissertation on the influence of comics on Canadian literature. Visual and intertextual play appears in all his work. Barrie showed me a story he was writing for the children's *Fraggle Rock* TV series. bp wrote his first script with songs in Episode 20, "The Garden Plot," April 4, 1983 -- Doc loses the rent money and Sprocket finds it while hammering at the Fraggles Hole. Then he showed how he imitated various voices. What happened since? The tape is now part of the CFM Archives at McMaster University. More than five hundred of the books I viewed that afternoon are now part of the bpNichol Science Fiction Collection at the University of Waterloo. A *Fraggle Rock* Episode Guide can be found on the Internet. Brian Nash directed a film celebrating the life of bpNichol. An annual bpNichol Chapbook award sponsored by the Phoenix Community Works Foundation (formerly Therapeutics Foundation) goes to the most innovative small or micro-press title between ten and 48 pages. A good explication of the visual elements of bp's poems can be located at the Light and Dust Mobile Poetry Anthology www.thing.net. Some *Ganglia* or grOnk press leaflets and broadsides can be ordered from Afterwords Literature, Station P, Toronto, M52 2Y4, or through dal@interlog.com or www.interlog.com. And the newly revitalized Coach House Printing on line (at www.chbook.com) has various editions of work by or influences on others from Barrie Philip Nichol. His spouse, Ellie Nichol, sends us postcards and broadsheets every Christmas and many are framed and hung at home. I started by asking bpNichol about his views on chapbooks:

bp: From a publishing point of view, it's almost as expensive to publish a chapbook as it is a book.

Typesetting is a bit cheaper. But the setup time, and working with the manuscript, is as complex. A chapbook is as hard to market, if not harder, because they are slimmer. The difference in cost between making a book and a chapbook is not that big, nor can it be sold for that much less. Perhaps two-thirds the cost. But it can only be priced at a certain amount or it looks ridiculous. Unless it's clearly a limited edition, or an alternative press that exists to "get the thing on the record."

GH: Is that how you saw grOnk?

bp: grOnk is an on-the-record press. It's not a little press, and it's not a press that's attempting to reach a big audience. It's a press that argues for certain people's work, though there's not a big audience for this stuff now. Maybe there is for the writer, but maybe not this part of the writer's work. So let's have a permanent record of it some place. grOnk is also a more news-oriented press than *blewointment* was. bill (bissett) ran it almost as a community statement, to show what writers are doing.

GH: Sounds like you have a big argument with that notion of immortality.

bp: I'm not trying to create a permanent record of greatness. I'm trying to get the news out right now for other writers. Hopefully through that, I argue for a wider based readership.

GH: What's the difference between a "little" and a "little-little" press?

bp: A little press is a different kind of publishing. "Here's a writer who deserves a book! This writer is neglected, or wants to publish with whomever." A little press publishes books. It may do chapbooks for political reasons, but it is not dedicated to the notion of the chapbook as a tool for argument. The publisher thinks there is enough material here that deserves a book. For most people, if you take the UNESCO definition, that's a bit on the small side. For most people, a book starts at around 64 pages, four or five signatures. The Canada Council adopted the UNESCO definition of a book in 1977. The consequences were enormous for Canadian small press publishing. The decision meant the end of chapbooks, posters, broadsides, ephemera, printed objects, everything printed except standard sized books.

GH: Was the UNESCO definition a help or hindrance?

bp: It was a hindrance in that it meant you could no longer publish chapbooks. It also was a hindrance in that it meant standardized book heights. If you knew that an 8.5 by 11 format meant the text came in at 32 pages, you would shift the format. You no longer, to the same degree, let the content dictate the form, to take Louis Sullivan's dictum to Frank Lloyd Wright.

GH: How does that hinder publishing poetry?

bp: Poetry comes in different sizes... you can't have a standard book size. Prose tends to bulk up nicely at a certain height. What I like about poetry is that it is one of the last bastions of alternative sizing. Poets still tend to think that way and stay closer to the manuscript that way. I'm a firm believer in the little-little press and the little press. The big commercial house is really the last friend that poetry has. Poetry is just a non-event as far as mainstream publishing goes. The UNESCO definition

tends to slightly work against the impulse of a poet in another way. If the impulse is to have a book of a certain length, and the only avenue is through some government sponsored press, then you are going to pad that book, sometimes, with weaker poems -- but it might have been stronger just to let the best poems have their own existence.

GH: What have you learned from concrete poetry?

bp: One of the things the concrete poetry movement taught me [was that] each little thing can be its own gesture. Maybe you collect those gestures together, maybe you don't. Maybe they just exist as their own little statement. Maybe that's a stronger way to present the work. Canada isn't used to that notion, though some presses do that.

GH: Why not?

bp: When I first published *Scriptures*, second sequence, 1965, as one of the first books with *Ganglia* Press, it was a standard book size, 5.5 by 8.5. I would sit in the bookstore and watch people read the thing. They didn't know who I was. They would pick up the thing and read it. There was a lot of blank space on the page. They didn't know what hit them. So, they aren't used to reading something more meditative than their usual reading experience, because readers tend to be consumption oriented, as one does when approaching a mystery book. One is dragged through the book. I am reading it to consume plot, not necessarily style, unless it's so bad I notice it. When a writer veers from the norm with sizes, you announce difference, you announce "non-bookends." That itself casts an aspersion on the event. You are making it special in some way. This can have positive connotations or negative. It can be special, or different, or unusual, or weird. Those are roughly the same word in some way. Most poets I meet like having "book" books. They feel somehow that the little gesture is not substantial enough. I don't see it as an either/or situation since I publish lots of both. They have the same problem the buyer does. Why would I spend three bucks for one poem? They'd spend three bucks for one novel, because they feel they are getting a lot for their money. That's the sheer quantity of words, which is, of course, no measure of quality.

GH: Tell me about *Ganglia* Press, out of which *grOnk* magazine began.

bp: The press began as a little magazine, *Ganglia*. Within a year or two, some books began. The two ideas of book and magazine were there together. *Ganglia* magazine also published two "book/issues" of the six issues of the magazine.

GH: (interviewer's note) One was *The 1962 poems of Red Lane*, which George Bowering steered bp's way. The other was bill bissett's *we sleep inside each othr all* (1966), which came out almost simultaneously with the Very Stone House edition. Victor Coleman and his wife Elizabeth helped key the book in.

bp: I had been living in Vancouver when *blewointment* first published. I had been reading the Dadaists and Kenneth Patchen's *Sleepers Awake* and *The Journal of Albion Moonlight*.

GH: (interviewer's note) At that time, in the 1960s, such books were hard to obtain. At the time he began *Ganglia* with David Aylward, Nichol's basic idea was to publish some of the west coast writing he liked, meaning the people around *blewointment*, such as bissett, Judith Copithorne, and so on. He also wanted to publish the young writers he knew in Toronto. Nichol's aim was to find the west coast work an outlet in Toronto. The movement was back and forth. bissett published Nichol's first poem in *blewointment*, an historical link (and postage was cheap in the 1960s). That was the initial impulse behind *Ganglia*. bp knew some writers, knew some writing he wanted, and everybody is generally interested if you are starting a magazine. He began out of that energy.

bp: At first, *Ganglia*, in its structure, if not its content, was a traditional little magazine. People mailed in poems, you take some, send some back. The paperwork started to mount up. It was also a traditional little press on the level of accounting. Suddenly we had to keep track of all these accounts. Both David and I got really irritated by the sheer work we had to do. Writers began treating us like a big concern and got pissed off if we didn't answer right away. So much bullshit went down! So quickly, we found a lot of poems we liked. But within five issues, we began to refocus. "Are we really interested in publishing a general poetry magazine?" In terms of that initial impulse, of publishing west coast writers in Ontario, that was no longer a problem. *Island* magazine and others began publishing those people. In the meantime, I was more caught up in Visual and Sound poetry. Though I was writing in the more traditional field, looking out there, it seemed to me that no magazine, with the exception of occasional pieces in *Alphabet*, was publishing sound and visual work. The impulse began to change the shape of the magazine. *Ganglia* was becoming burdensome. I wanted something that was quicker, and I wanted something that involved no accounting. Since you lose money anyway with a small press, why not do it for free? Do it for free as a news-sheet. Part of the reason for this was *Tish* which I read in Vancouver. It was lively. Though I took argument with its tone rather than its poetics. By tone, I meant *Tish* was adamant that theirs was the only path to follow. Though if you look at the writers who came out of *Tish*, it wasn't true in their lives. We were young then! I've always been more of an inclusivist than an exclusivist. To me, the range is interesting. Looking around, I saw lots of generalist little magazines and little presses. The idea of doing that seemed like a total snooze to me. Why not focus on where my real excitement was? That became my guiding principle in all the subsequent years. Why not publish the stuff that excites me for political reasons, for poetical reasons, or political/poetical reasons? So we let *Ganglia* drift into oblivion. *Ganglia* was thought up by David Aylward. A ganglion is a connection in the brain, a synaptic connector. In fact, a small magazine, which sprang off from *grOnk*, was *Synopsis*. We liked the notion of brain activity. That seemed relevant to the idea of poetry and perception.

GH: *Ganglia* was very much a poetry oriented press and magazine. Were you that much more interested in editing poetry than in editing prose?

bp: I write prose, I read prose, I'm interested in editing prose, but my heart beats faster around poetry! The traditional poem excites me more than the traditional short story does, which is an interesting drawing line.

GH: (interviewer's note) *grOnk* magazine began as a free mailout. Quickly, the number eight became symbolic for the publication. bp, David W. Harris (a.k.a. David UU), David Aylward, and Rob Smith were the four principals who put money into it. The two active editors in the first eight issues were bp and David UU.

bp: Once again, it's safe to say it was my idea. David UU was in there for sure, and the others were in for friendship reasons, but it wasn't a driving force for them. We ran them off ourselves, mailed them out ourselves, put the money in ourselves. The benefits were fantastic. We were able to send news from Canada to other writers we admired.

GH: (interviewer's note) Other writers, like Andy Suknaski, were able to see their work published in an international context. With the second series, which began after David UU moved to Vancouver, bp began to push it into single author issues. Everything in a way became "books" or little pamphlets, or little gestures. bp also began the mini-mimeo series.

bp: Little wee foldouts that we published and sold for five cents -- the Five Cents Mini-Mimeo Series. Bookstores wouldn't stock them because they were too easy to steal, and then they'd owe me a nickel. The name "grOnk," of course, was the sound made by the dinosaur in the B.C. comic strip. That's why the giant "O". grOnk! A dinosaur's open mouth! We liked the abstract sound, plus it was an announcement of difference. You couldn't pin down its existence in the real world, though it had its real world existence.

GH: (interviewer's note) The focus of *grOnk* was entirely experimental or visual poetry with a sound bias. From a publishing point of view, Nichol was interested in getting for Canadian writers a broader base on an international scene. His own first successes, in fact, were abroad. Presses in Europe were accepting of his work. In North America, Canadian writers were not seen as a serious issue. In that sense, Nichol says, all writing is regional. American writers tended to be influenced by American writers because they find their concerns less alien to them.

bp: They might be influenced by the style of Julio Cortazar or Borges. But as far as their content goes, their socio-politico-emotional issues tend to come out of their peer group. The great argument in English language Canadian writing is between England and America. For the Australians or New Zealanders or Latin Americans to get a leg into the argument is almost impossible. It helped for a while if your background was a white centred "ethnic," but even that has ceased to be an edge as far as English language Canada is concerned. That was a big concern for me. I have strong feelings about it. On the other hand, that has to do with large states of mind. On the immediate level of publishing and being

published, you're interested in news, and what's going down, and you find the news where you can find the news. As for me at that time, the news was in Europe and South America and those were the writers I corresponded with, sending magazines out, and getting magazines back. That was the form most correspondence took; you sent out magazines and got magazines back more often than letters. That's what *grOnk* was, a letter-in-progress. For a long time, I did a *grOnk* News Notes. I'd publish anything that came across my table. I'd write it up and send it out with *grOnk*. But postage kept going up out of sight. The whole notion of a freebie became more and more expensive to do. In a funny kind of way, the printing got easier and cheaper because of quickie printing and plastic plates. But stamps made it trickier and trickier. It got harder to get a third class mailing permit. In the sixties it was easy; you just walked into a post office and said, "I'm a press."

GH: Did you have somewhat the same sense of Dudek and Souster that a writer-controlled press could affect the direction of literature?

bp: The impulse was there before I formulated it. For some writers, like Steve McCaffery, the formulation of his thinking, and his practice are very close together. They occur at the same point in time. For me, there's a three to six month lag. It used to be longer. It seemed natural to me to say if nobody was going to publish me, then I would publish myself. What took me longer to utter as a basic formulation was that it is easy for writers to seize the means of production and do it themselves. I look at someone like Norman Chadwick, of Toronto's Martin Garth Press which publishes *The Shit*. He published a novel in variant editions. It's no different for prose writers. You can do what Crad Kilodney or Stuart Ross do; sell it on the street. Now, if you're writing a Proustian epic, then you need a big publisher. But if you're writing a Proustian epic, you're probably going to have trouble getting a big publisher! Writers can seize the means of production. But they can't necessarily get a big audience that way. When writers are talking about their publisher problems, they are talking about the problems of getting a big audience. If what you want is to get the work out there, what you want, on the record, available to the immediate circle of writers you know, who are your lifeblood and keep you rolling, and to have something to give away at bookstores or readings, it's possible for any writer to get published to some degree. That formulation was there for me and it made a big difference to me. I'm a strong believer in writer-run presses, particularly with poetry. To me it's almost a moral/ethical thing. If, as writers, we aren't going to get out there to publish the writing we believe in, writers whose work pushes in a positive direction, then whom else is going to? That's what Dennis Lee and Dave Godfrey felt around Anansi. Their concern was around prose. They are the ones who got the prose thing going in Canada. They got it going with the Spiderline Series, a group of cheap novels gang-printed on the same day. Jack McClelland had done Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* -- my favourite novel of all time -- in that cheap paperback format. But they hadn't done much with it.

Cheap commercial novels were done in paperback. But they weren't necessarily a gesture towards building a Canadian intellectual tradition through prose. The Spiderline Series was exciting at the time. Here were people who felt the same energy in prose. Let's just get a whole bunch of novels pumped out. We didn't just have to have three Canadian novels a year. That idea took hold in people's brains.

GH: (interviewer's note) With the flurry of magazine and small press activity, it was no longer possible for one magazine to dominate, as *The Tamarack Review* had for so many years. That magazine began to slide from importance, interest, and influence in the late 1960s, bpNichol claims. People also lost interest in the *Tamarack* when it rejected Victor Coleman's poem, "Cunnilingus".

bp: It was gutsy of them to accept it, and gutless of them to reject it, especially when it was already typeset. That was happening, and then the Canada Council came in with the money. When the Canada Council came along, there were a lot of presses in place, looking for ways to find money. These organizations were ready to take the money if it was handed out! We never saw ourselves as the Hogarth Press. In fact, if you look at the back of the mini-mimeo series, you'll see a notice, "instant garbage for the nation's waste baskets." Several things influenced *grOnk*. The monthly publication [schedule] was borrowed directly from *Tish*, though the magazine had a different audience entirely. *Tish* was an inspiration for one notion -- you didn't have to have subscribers. It could just be something you sent out if you thought the writing was interesting to people. If they write back, or send back stuff, it was interesting. Another model in terms of the variations in formats was the whole impulse behind international concrete poetry. The varying shapes of Ian Hamilton Finlay poems were published with his presses and other concrete people. The person I was most in touch with was the late d.a. levy of Cleveland. We had the Cleveland-Toronto-Niagara-axis going for awhile. d.R. Wagner was in Niagara on the U.S. side. Then bill and myself. We were all out of the "dirty mimeo" school of thought. *Ganglia* was probably the cleanest of the bunch. Get it done and get it out; it's news. bill was using collage as an internal principle. He had the most regular magazine look of any of them, more so than d.a. and d.R. I had given up on the regular magazine thing and was more interested in the news I find interesting. It was also a way to respond quickly to the work. *Ganglia* was more like a newspaper in my thinking about it. A lot of my editing was news edited. "I like this line -- the rest of it is just okay," and "what's happening in this line is goddamn exciting, let's develop it and get it out right away!" Occasionally, I got a superb piece, but... I was not looking to preserve immortal works in magazine form.

GH: Sounds like 1960s drug-induced thought.

bp: The drug culture did not play any part in my press because I never took drugs. At the period in my life when I might have taken drugs, you were *persona non grata* if you lost smoke at pot parties and I did, the first couple I went to. I was no good that way. I used to go

through stages of mind without the benefit of drugs like LSD and mushrooms and found them freaky enough. I was trying to get out of that headspace. I was not attracted to the idea of drugs. People talked about mind altering, and that's the way my mind went without drugs. I was trying to get out of that space so I could do some work. A lot of people assumed drugs were involved because the work was so far out. They assumed I was on really heavy shit! They'd come up to Toronto from the states and ask, "hey man, whose your connection?" I said, "hey man, I don't have one!"

GH: Who helped out?

bp: Basically, John Riddell or Steve McCaffery helped with various aspects of the press. I got some hands on involvement from people who helped collate and so on. But I never sat down and discussed the press abstractly. I did it. The press was designed to be responsive. So a publishing program was not worked out in advance. The points at which I had too much stuff backlogged were the points it went dead for a time. It ceased in a way to be in/out. I wanted a system that was in/out. *Ganglia's* sense of an audience was very specific. I had a mailing list. Since I was not going for newsstand sales, except locally if someone would stock it, I would just mail the thing out. I had a very specific idea of who its 250 readers were. The publications all became book/issues in the end because I could make a slightly chunkier thing. I could give the authors more copies so they could sell them at readings. At that point, I would have an element of the audience who was unknown to me, but at least were potential readers for this person's work. I re-read some issues of *Alphabet* not so long ago and they are still interesting. There's still some stuff I can pick up on. I saw myself, in the phrase I used, as "the language revolution." A lot of shit-kicking rhetoric went down. I was interested in work that pushed against the boundaries, that dealt in some way with the reality of the text on the page or the reality of the text as it existed in sound. These were the issues that interested me as a writer. I knew I appealed to a minority audience. That's why the idea of a newsletter made sense.

GH: Was this an exciting time to be involved?

bp: Toronto was not an exciting place to be in the early part of the 1960s, say 1963 to 1966. Having a correspondence with Cavan McCarthy in Leeds and other writers like Bob Cobbing was a tremendous encouragement. bissett was a great encouragement, though he was in Vancouver. Not a lot of people were interested in what I was interested in. There was a feeling I was just crazy, and the feeling I was pursuing an absolute dead end assailed me in those days. Fortunately, I have a pleasant stubborn streak. I will follow a thing as long as it interests me, though I can't see the reason for it. Those were harder years. Around 1966, David UU came down from Collingwood. He was excited, up about the stuff. We yakked a lot. I had a lot to do with Dave until he moved to the west coast in the fall of 67. After he left town, there weren't many people here. Then, Steve McCaffery moved here from England. That made a huge difference in my life. Here was someone who was concerned with the same issues, and

covered the same ground from his own angle for his own reasons. Steve and I are very dissimilar writers. But we share a lot of concerns. I always concerned myself with design, typeface, and papers on the press though you wouldn't necessarily know it by looking. I was working with two or three concerns. One was, I would experiment with the actual physical size, whether it was folded or stapled, whether it had a drawing. In the later period of *grOnk*, and the last few years, when all the principles had changed, I experimented with ready-made formats. I'd just walk into an office supply store and see what kinds of things they had, plastic covers, and other weirdness. These things are often expensive, cost heavy on the format side. But they lead to interesting solutions. This is almost the opposite approach to traditional publishing. The first is, you have a piece, and you wonder what shape it should be in. With this, you have a shape, and you wonder what will fit it. *grOnk* went through distinctive periods. The first was the monthly series, like a monthly magazine. That was the old series. The second part of the old series, each in eight issues, began to move quickly to single author issues. Then I began to issue them out of order. It drove librarians wild. GH: It was your equivalent of Ed Sander's *Fuck you: a Magazine of the Arts*.

bp: Only I was more insidious. I would have Series Eight, Number Five, followed by Series Eight, Number One. I used to work in a library. *Blewointment* did the same thing, only their numbering was false. Mine was consistent, which was worse. The old series was a mail away, which went to sixty-four issues. One still hasn't properly appeared. But they are all basically done. Some were double issues of *grOnk* which doubled as *Ganglia* publications. They varied from 250 to 500 copies. Then, I began the middle series, of 24 issues, a multiple of eight. That was a subscription series. Once again, subscription proved truly boring. But, I managed to get all 24 issues out. I let most people's subscriptions lapse after twelve or thirteen issues and kept putting it out. Then I did the *grOnk*, *Zap*, and *Flash* series of fifty copies each. I gave them to the authors to give away. I've been working on the final series, of about 100 copies each. Now I give 60 to 75 copies to the author to distribute as they see fit. I keep twenty-five for my immediate giveaways. There's also the *grOnk* Random Series. That's anywhere from fifty to 500 copies. It's hard to collect a complete set.

GH: (interviewer's note) Throughout Nichol's life, *grOnk* also existed as a press. Some of the publications were issued as cassettes through Underwhich Editions. Copies were given to the authors, and Nichol kept the rest. bpNichol saw his publications as "support documentation."

GH: Did you learn the technical aspects of publishing through trial and error?

bp: We wanted to start a magazine. How? What was the cheapest? What seemed cheapest at the beginning was a mimeo machine that I bought. It eventually rusted out in Steve McCaffery's basement through neglect. We hand-cranked lots of it. That's the way we printed most of *Ganglia* magazine. Issues five and seven were offset.

Issue six never appeared. Issue eight was printed at Weed/Flower press by Nelson Ball on a tiny machine. *grOnk* was printed at Speedy Printers. Plus the occasional mimeo, and the run of the Five Cent Mini-Mimeo Series. A few were offset. After number 39 or 40, they were offset. The Speedy Printshops were a late sixties early seventies thing. That was a case of technology giving me access to a way of quick printing. As a kid, I had always made up books of my poems. In my mid-teens, I made up copies of books of poems and gave them to my friends. I was always playing with the form of the book. I was a voracious reader. I think if you read, and unless you are totally oblivious, you are always aware of "page." When we began to work on *Ganglia* and *grOnk*, one of our first organizing principles was that we did not want somebody's poem facing somebody else's poem. As early as 1964, we said everybody should have their own space. So that leads logically to concrete poetry. Everything should have its own space. Sometimes a really good piece looked not as good placed against another poem. They were not always complementary pairs. Even strong poems might not look so good side by side. That's not something you'd do with your own manuscript. We would put a drawn piece on the other page, something entirely different.

GH: How did you get involved with Coach House Press?

bp: About 1964 or 1965, I met Stan Bevington of Coach House, and began to get a lot of hands-on experience with type and typography and a fantastic basic training. I was already open to it. I did not see a press as something someone did for me, labour for hire. I wanted to get in there, down and dirty and involved. The chance to do some hand typesetting was fantastic. I was interested in "collectibles," as I was a collector. But that was not my motivation. I was just thinking of the Tonto Or, a *Ganglia* press series. They were all done on offsets, back in the days when you had lots of paper samples to choose from. Stan had lots sitting on shelves, and Coach House was easy access. I could use a proof press, which is an easy-to-use flat-bed press. I was setting up the type. Stan was encouraging of that kind of involvement. I learned a lot from Stan about books and book design. Stan was a good person to learn from because he was always arguing within and against. He was a traditional hand-set typist who got interested in linotype, and then computers. He was my first introduction to computers in the early 1970s.

A *grOnk* "first edition" doesn't have the same "power" as, say, a Hogarth Press first edition. The context of the time is as important as the text. Because the texts were "news," there's some that date, and some that don't. I was not involved in that kind of editorial process which would say, "these are the ones that last for all time." I'd simply say, "Here's what's new." Someone else can collect them, if they want, on a "timeless basis." I was interested in the half-life of the poem, the decay, and the fact that things faded away. The model for me was Keats, dead at 26. All that bullshit about "make it wait, make it a considered thing,"

was not for me. I could be dead. I thought I would die at 18. So it was all gravy for me in the years since then. 23 years of gravy -- that's nice! It was an *idée fixe* I got when I was young. My impulse had nothing to do with preserving in that sense. To get it on the record, yes. But even that was a later thought. Earlier on, the thought was to get the news out. I published tons and tons. Lots of Europeans, bill bissett, Dave Phillips, Andy Suknaski, Martina Clinton, Beth Jankola, Pat Lowther, lots of Steve McCaffery, lots of David UU, some Mike Ondaatje. I worked closely with the authors if they were close. Generally, I published someone because I liked their work, and wanted to get their text out. Sometimes, it was just one text of a writer whose work I didn't usually like. It was good to defeat my own thinking. I never went after grants. I did it when I had money. That got a little more random at times. That's the impulse with Underwhich Editions. However, we did a little press catalogue that included *Ganglia*, Anansi, Talon -- the Busy Beaver catalogue was an attempt to include everybody's little books. That was a late sixties impulse. That was an interesting time. There was *Ganglia* Press, Island Press which remained "little-little" and alternative. Then there was Anansi and Talon who began to operate on a different scale. But there was enough affinity that we could do a joint catalogue. *Ganglia* and *grOnk* had some influence, though it's hard to say what, after looking over the sea of mundane writing. I think of Victor Coleman and Dennis Lee as discerning editors who worked with the text. They worked with the author more than I would. I tend to take the text as it is, make my suggestions, and they take it or leave it. I take the text as it is because it already interests me. Behind *Ganglia* and *grOnk* was a strong idea; to focus on certain work, to argue for that work, and to put enough of the work forward so that readers could get a feeling for the sheer quantity of people who approached the text this way. Then, they could get used to that kind of text, and develop reading habits around it. It's not saying too much to say that in its own small way, and despite its own small readership, that this effect is inherent in the idea of a small press. If you start with a small gesture, the ripple effect spreads out. You don't have to worry about the audience size for your work to have impact. Once you get hung up on the numbers game, you can get really depressed. *Ganglia* and *grOnk* had an impact on the international scene by giving some presence to some writers from Canada who were working on the visual thing while it was happening. They [*Ganglia* and *grOnk*] had an impact on the national scene by making people aware poets were doing this in Canada and in other countries as well. That was an authentication of it. In Canada, there's no better authentication than the fact it is being done elsewhere. It's like buying a car. Am I the only one buying this car? Does that mean parts will be hard to get? People feel the same about their reading. *Ganglia* and *grOnk* widened the notion of what was possible for the Canadian reader. Perhaps the texts weren't the most original in their areas. But I wasn't interested in that. I was interested in the reality of literature as something you do while you are alive. You

write while you are alive, you live somewhere while you are alive, you want readers while you are alive. It's fine and dandy to say, "well, they'll read it while I'm gone." Horseshit! You don't know that. If you want those readers, then you have to go out and argue for the audience. That's what I did. As for the 1980s, kids of eighteen don't seem to read widely. In poetry, there's a lot of good writing, but very little that is exciting. Even stuff that is stylistically competent or advanced doesn't give fresh insights into the human condition if I'm just seeing another exegesis on a human relationship that I got from the Greeks (and more powerfully because of the philosophy behind it). But the umpteenth poem on me and mom, the home scene, or me and my relationship to the lyric impulse, which is the bulk of Canadian poetry, doesn't give me any news. So I'm not getting anything fresh from what they are talking about.

GH: How about on the level of language?

bp: No.

GH: How about on the level of metaphor?

bp: No.

GH: So what's going on?

bp: It's okay poetry, well written, competent, but not very exciting. Partly it's reader's taste. But how many poems can I read about two people fighting in a darkened room? I've heard that beat. I've been criticized for my formalism. You can see the bones of my pieces. When I look at the traditional poem or story, that's an exoskeletal structure. I can see the beats of the poem, the pegs they hang their narrative on. I can see the whole thing laid out, like an X-ray. I'm looking for something that acknowledges that, and then does something with it. In the mid-sixties, the most common male poem was from the *courier de bois* tradition. The poet comes in from the woods, slams his ax on the table, and declaims a poem about his sex life. That has its own boredom. With different beats, that's been the popular male voice in Canadian poetry for years. It's there in a different way in Pat Lane. Al Purdy does it brilliantly. Early Leonard Cohen does it. Pat does the other big Canadian thing with the poem -- go to another country and write about it. What has been really good, has been the growth of regional presses. But most of those presses are still regional. Stan Bevington joked at a recent Coach House Press editorial meeting that we were the last press still to publish west coast writers. He was worried about becoming a regional press like everyone else. But it's not regional if it's from Toronto; it's centralist!

GH: (interviewer's note) bp died in 1988 of complications from a spinal operation at the age of 44. He is the first Canadian poet to have a street named after him in Toronto, bpNichol Lane, located parallel to Huron Street, the location of Coach House Printing.