

Links: Before

Links was most likely first conceived of in Sligo, Ireland some ten years ago. At a small art museum, my missus and I viewed an installation presenting reciprocally inspired poems and paintings. I being a writer and she a visual artist, the show resonated fairly wildly in our shared imagination. Many times over the ensuing years, Amy and I made small strides towards enacting our own versions of what we had experienced, at one point even attempting something not wholly dissimilar from the Renga-like chain that is now half the *Links* project; we "traded" pieces, songs and paintings, each with the instructions to "create to" the other's work. Although nothing particularly concrete or substantial emerged from those early experiments, the kernel of the idea never left me. Thankfully, nor has Amy! She is in fact a key player in *Links*, and her piece "Three Trees (Light)" plays a pivotal role in the project.

Links in its current form began to attain recognizable tangibility while I was Writer-In-Residence at The Kerouac House in Orlando, Florida. For three months in the fall of 2006 I lived in the house where Jack Kerouac wrote his novel *The Dharma Bums* and his long poem *Orlanda Blues*. During my stay I wrote an unexpectedly substantial amount of Haiku. It was a form and style I had always loved and had periodically written in before, but never with the consistency or intensity that I found at The Kerouac House. Fairly early on, somewhere in the storm-rocked weeks of my first Florida September, I inadvertently stumbled into a new twist on the form. I had sent off some recently composed Haiku to my good friend the poet Robert Lavett Smith, and on receiving the work he commented on how he had never seen "Linked Haiku" before. I had certainly not intended them to be a unified set of works per se, nor identified them as such, but looking back on what I had sent him, it was clear there were associative links running through the pieces; some obvious, some obtuse, but always there, and he had noted it right away. This was a magical discovery for me. For the rest of my time at the house, I tried to write what

I came to think of as Linked Haiku as often as I could. Although I didn't know it at the time, these works were to become a major component in *Links*, far more so than just lending the project its name.

Over the years, I have ebbed and flowed as regards my feeling for Kerouac the writer, but being in his former home, writing where he once wrote, I felt obliged to return to his work again. Accordingly, I read him in some capacity daily. In the past I had never paid much mind to his poetry, only his fiction, or occasionally his letters. So I decided to give his poems a chance. My goal was to read all of *Mexico City Blues*, Kerouac's famous "242 Choruses"-long poem, which had been created entirely spontaneously, the only formal constraint having been the size of the notebook pages that he wrote on.

Apparently, Kerouac considered this constraint to be directly analogous to the bar length restrictions that jazz musicians work within while constructing their solos. This idea of creating freely, while acutely constrained by form, made great sense in light of my Haiku experiments, and here again, as I read Kerouac's wildly improvisational poems, *Links* as both concept and tangible endeavor slowly began to approach recognizable shape.

When my time at The Kerouac House came to its inevitable conclusion, I returned to the real world of graduate school thesis requirements, knowing full well it was time for me to commit to a third semester critical thesis project. Without quite knowing what it was going to be, or how I was going to create it, I began setting out my first descriptions of, and explanations for, what was to become *Links*. I felt certain that the project would involve interactions between poetry, music, and visual art, and that it would ideally embrace the methodology of creating freely while constrained by both form and time.

It was a seminar that poet Dennis Nurkse delivered at a Stonecoast MFA residency that finally gave me the concrete mind-picture which had until then eluded me. Dennis' subject was essentially non-Western poetic forms, and although he had originally

intended to spend as much time on the Ghazal as the Haiku, the bulk of his talk was given over instead to Renga, an ancient Japanese form of collaborative poetry. Watching Dennis lead the audience in creating an actual Renga, on the spot, on the fly, I realized that not only was this something that somehow had to be a part of my project, but that Dennis would have to be the mentor. I could finally see it for what it might become. Fortunately, Dennis was enthusiastic enough about my initial presentation to take on the guiding role. *Links* from that point forward became a near-sculptural endeavor. The project had arrived in my brain as a giant block of granite, and between myself and Dennis, the job was to chisel away at what *wasn't* the sculpture.

As both the creative and academic legwork for *Links* got underway, my muses, my heroes, became Basho, Sleepy John Estes, Jackson Pollock, Issa, Bukka White, Ch'i Pai-Shih, Han-Shan, Robert Pete Williams, Mark Tobey, and so many more. My primary teacher was of course Dennis, but there was also David Evans, Kenneth Yasuda, John Berger, Fritz van Briessen, Kevin Young, and many other thinkers, annotators, creators, and collectors whose works of artistic scholarship were invaluable to me. A special nod should be given to the poet A. Van Jordan, who I first discovered in Kevin Young's "Blues Poems" anthology (at Dennis' suggestion!), and from whose lead I developed the "Blues Haiku" that came to comprise an important portion of my own creative output for *Links*. Above all else, the truly vital figures in the project were the actual collaborators. Without their skills, their creativity, their receptivity, there would be no project at all. One by one, as I reached out with my early proposals, artist after artist "signed on," until I had a line-up of talent far richer and more profound than I had rights to even dream of. The first time I sat down and wrote out a complete list of my "roster" was the first time I think I truly realized what was actually going on. *Links* was becoming a reality, and I was both terrified and elated.